Why CAMERON BOOZER is the most prepared prospect the NBA draft has seen in years

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PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERIK CARTER

NATURAL BORN WINNER

by BRYAN FISCHER

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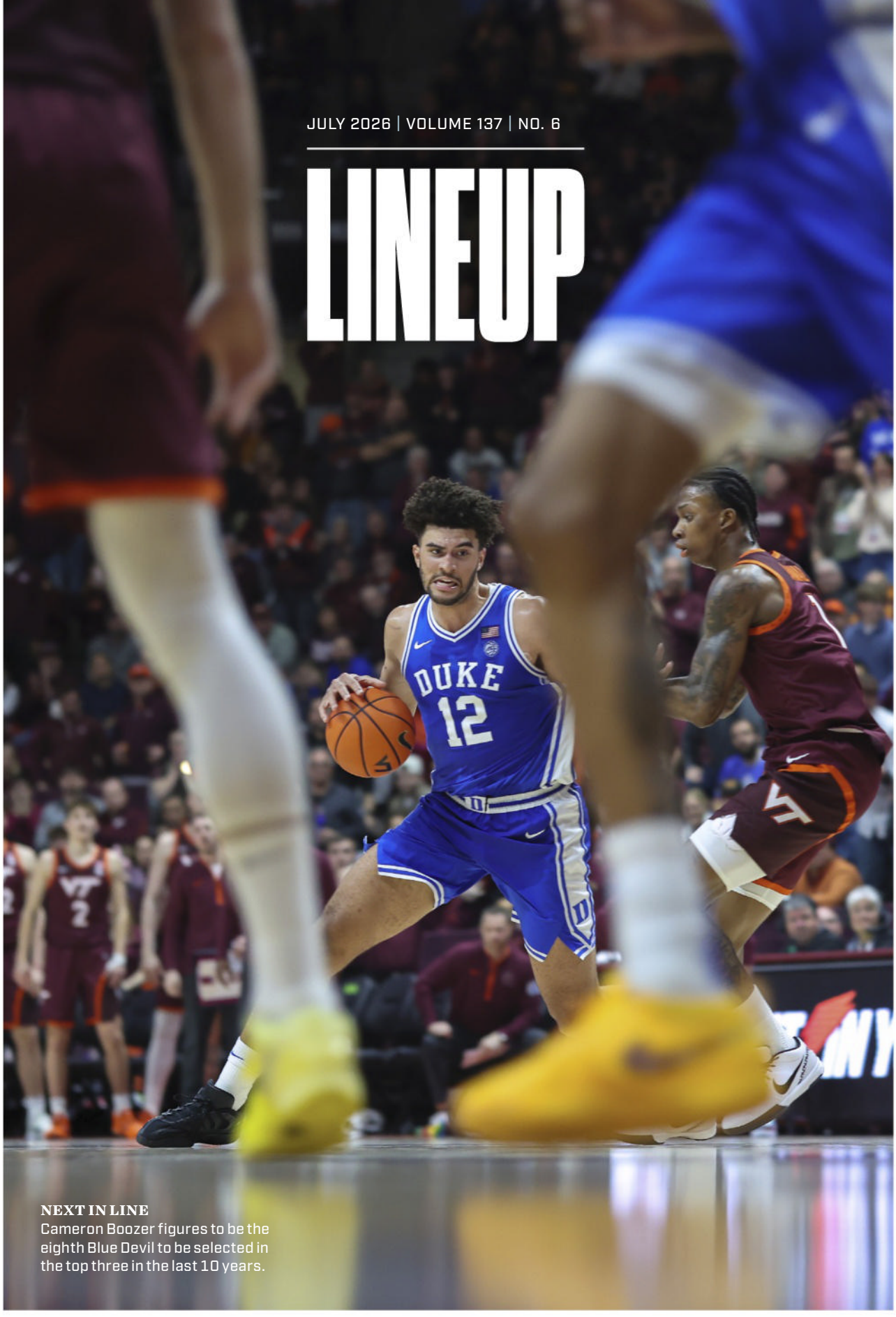

NEXT IN LINE
Cameron Boozer figures to be the eighth Blue Devil to be selected in the top three in the last 10 years.

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LINEUP

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SCORECARD

ESSAY

The More, The Merrier?

WHEN IT COMES TO NCAA HOOPS TOURNAMENTS, BIGGER DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN BETTER

BY PAT FORDE

FROM LEFT: JAMIE SABAU/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; MATTHEW MAXEY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

STRIKING MIDNIGHT
Cinderellas will have a tougher run while major programs like NIT champ Auburn and OU will have a better chance to make the field.

IN EARLY May, a college sports industry with no restraint, no shame and no appreciation for its consumers did what came naturally. It formalized the expansion of something that almost nobody wants to see expanded.

The NCAA men's and women's basketball tournament fields will each grow to 76 teams in 2027. March Madness will continue to be contorted into something it shouldn't be, adding eight more teams and eight more play-in games. The perfect tournament bracket, already sullied by going from 64 to 68, will be further graffitied to make more money and satisfy more millionaire coaches and athletic directors.

Thank you, esteemed college sports leaders, for this insult to our collective intelligence. Shoving an unpopular idea down our throats and disguising it as progress required some vigorous spin-doctoring.

The sample bracket the NCAA released for the 2027 tournament looks cleaner than it figures to be when the names and seeds of 24 teams in opening-round games are included at the top. The added clutter will be harder to present on a laptop screen or a printed page, and it creates more first-round matchup guesswork for those wishing to fill out a bracket for a pool sometime before Thursday morning. (Do not underestimate how much that matters to the casual fan.)

More spin: The NCAA says this was a move to increase the championship participation percentage of the entire Division I membership, which had been 18%—lowest in any sport, the association says. It now will be 21%. The NCAA cites the increased Division I membership since 1985 from 282 to 361 in the men's game and from 277 to 359 on the women's side. What it doesn't say is that few of those 80 additional programs will be even remotely close to at-large consideration.

They aren't expanding to make room for recent Division I call-ups LeMoyne, West Georgia and California Baptist. They're expanding to make room for more largely unsuccessful teams from high-major conferences that already have all the advantages. If you look at the NCAA NET ratings and Wins Above Bubble metrics, a majority of the teams closest to making the 68-team men's field this March were from the five power conferences (yes, the Big East is a power conference).

They're expanding to make room for Oklahoma, which lost nine straight games at one point last season and tied for 11th in the Southeastern Conference. They're expanding to make room for Auburn, which was 17–16 on Selection Sunday and also tied for 11th in the SEC. They're expanding to make room for Indiana, which lost six of its last seven and was a widely disliked team by its own fan base by season's end.

They are dumbing down the product and expect the public to be dumb enough to go along with it.

Meanwhile, the low-major league champions will be further marginalized. Previously, two No. 16 seeds and all the No. 15s were placed in the main bracket on Selection Sunday. Now there will

NOT SAYING "HOO-SIER"
An expanded field would benefit a school such as Indiana, which was a frequent target of boos from its own fans last season.

be eight 16s and six 15s, further pushing some automatic qualifiers down the pecking order and into opening-round games.

All the No. 16s will have to play their way into the main bracket, and half the No. 15s. Siena, which led overall No. 1 seed Duke by 13 in the second half in the first round of the 2026 tournament, would have to go through a fellow 16-seed to even get that opportunity next year. Furman, which trailed No. 2 seed UConn by four at halftime, would be dispatched to Dayton to play another No. 15.

There is one more layer preventing the next UMBC, Fairleigh Dickinson, Saint Peter's or Florida Gulf Coast—recent double-digit seeds who made March truly mad—from getting its chance to shock the world.

The NCAA release announcing this expansion says the value of its media-rights agreement to broadcast the tournament will increase by $50 million annually over the next six years, and that it will award more than $131 million in new revenue distribution to schools participating in the tourney. Part of the unlocked revenue will be the introduction of alcohol advertising via more commercials, according to CBS Sports's Matt Norlander. The Thursday noon ET tip-off can, theoretically, be sponsored by High Noon.

It is no coincidence that pushing March Madness to the max is happening at the same time college sports leaders contemplate inflating the College Football Playoff to an obnoxious 24 teams. The money grab is brazen and desperate, as schools attempt to pay athletes without controlling expenses in their revenue-producing sports.

There is considerable myth, folklore and outright lying about what schools are spending on their football and men's basketball rosters right now. But one thing is true at many power-conference schools: Payrolls have skyrocketed far past the $20.5 million cap that was agreed upon in the federal settlement of the House v. NCAA lawsuit. What was touted as a landmark, problem-solving mandate became obsolete in less than a year.

Meanwhile, coaching salaries continue to escalate, with Alabama raising the pay for its fairly unpopular football coach, Kalen DeBoer, from $10 million to $12.5 million and North Carolina paying new men's basketball coach Michael Malone $8.3 million a year after he was fired from his last job, with the Denver Nuggets.

California's scandal-plagued athletic director, Jim Knowlton, retired last year and the school hired two people, Jay Larson and Jenny Simon-O'Neill, to replace him. Kentucky is reportedly considering replacing the retiring Mitch Barnhart with a two-headed AD leadership tandem. Departments are adding and reposing staff in pursuit of content-creation revenue.

THEY ARE DUMBING DOWN THE PRODUCT AND EXPECT THE PUBLIC TO GO ALONG WITH IT.

And when the bottom lines continue to tilt into the red, guess who is going to take the hit? Not the football and basketball teams, where the imperative is spend, baby, spend. Olympic sports seem to constantly be in the crosshairs. Arkansas whacked men's and women's tennis before reinstating them in May. Ohio State defunded men's gymnastics scholarships in 2024 before reversing course. And there are ominous signs about the future of Pitt's men's and women's swim teams, despite coming off their best seasons ever.

FROM LEFT: ROBERT GODDIN/IMAGN IMAGES; RICH CLARKSON

There is no identifiable evidence that the American sporting public wants 76-team basketball tournaments and a 24-team football tournament. But in an industry that has no interest in confronting or controlling its greed and gluttony, the revenue monster must be fed.

When you're watching the 11th-place ACC team play the 10th-place Big 12 team on a Tuesday night next March, remember the college sports leadership that brought you that March Madness classic.

Better yet, don't watch it at all. □

FIELD DAYS

HERE'S HOW THE NUMBER OF TEAMS IN THE NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT HAS EVOLVED. (UNTIL 1975, ONLY CONFERENCE CHAMPIONS WERE ELIGIBLE.)

	1939	8
	1951	16
(Field size fluctuated)	1953 -74	22-25
	1975	32
(Michigan State becomes the first at-large team to win the title)	1979	40
	1980	48
	1983	52
	1984	53
	1985	64
(Addition of one play-in game)	2001	65
	2011	68

(For the first time, the field included 12 at-large teams in addition to 16 conference champs and four teams from regional tournaments)

(Introduction of the First Four)

AT-LARGE AND IN CHARGE
Magic Johnson's Spartans got into the 1979 NCAA tournament without winning their conference.

CAN'T MISS

PRESENTING THE TOP 10 GAMES OF THE NFL SEASON

BY CONOR ORR

WHEN IT comes to NFL games, my definition of "great" can carry many different connotations. What is at stake, both locally and globally? Whose success and failure does the matchup really boil down to? Writing about the NFL has given me a wonderful opportunity to view even the worst football at its highest stakes. I hope by taking a look at my best 10 games of the season (listed here in chronological order), you'll agree.

WEEK 2

LIONS AT BILLS

Thursday, Sept. 17, 8:15 p.m. ET

I am not normally a new stadium guy. But the Bills deserved a new home. Their old one, the original Highmark, opened in 1973 (as Rich Stadium), during that hideous era of stadium construction when everything looked like an unsafe spaceship.

Seeing the Bills open their new place in a Thursday night game against the Lions will, at the very least, be aesthetically pleasing. This is the one spot on this list where I'll allow the matchup to be secondary (though in this case it involves a pair of teams that have failed in recent years to get over the hump and into the Super Bowl).

WEEK 3

EAGLES AT BEARS

Monday, Sept. 28, 8:15 p.m. ET

Beating the Eagles in a Black Friday game was a cut-through-the-clutter win for Chicago in 2025. This year an early-season Monday night contest will provide a critical check on the health of the relationship between QB Jalen Hurts and new offensive coordinator Sean Mannion. They're up against a Bears defense that probably needs more reinforcements than what it got this offseason. This feels like the first prime-time game that holds real consequences for the team that loses.

WEEK 5

TEXANS AT TITANS

Sunday, Oct. 11, 1 p.m. ET

I would be stunned if DeMeco Ryans's defense in Houston doesn't finish as the league's No. 1 unit. On paper, this is one of the most talented groups we've seen in the past decade. And it's worth watching how well Cam Ward fares against that defense about a month into his pivotal second year. Tennessee had to erase nearly everything about Ward's first season, which is just about the worst-case scenario for a No. 1 pick.

WEEK 6

JAGUARS vs. TEXANS

Sunday, Oct. 18, 9:30 a.m. ET in London

Not to overload this slate with Texans talk, or the AFC South for that matter, but here's one more. Jacksonville and Houston went about a crucial offseason differently. The Jags leaned on their process, comfortably let go of some key contributors and homed in on a hyperspecific draft strategy that saw them make selections that were not necessarily aligned with the national consensus. The Texans needed help, too, but opted for familiar faces.

This game is important because it's a benchmark in a burgeoning rivalry and a true test for two teams that should have realistic, deep postseason aspirations.

FROM LEFT: COOPER NEILL/GETTY IMAGES; LOGAN BOWLES/GETTY IMAGES

WEEK 9

RAIDERS AT 49ERS

Sunday, Nov. 8, 4:05 p.m. ET

How is Maxx Crosby doing? It's a fair question, especially around the trade deadline. Obviously, the concern with Crosby's balky knee is a long-term one, but if he has eight or so sacks at the deadline—when he'll be just a year and change away from being at a cutoff point in his contract—is he worth a first-round pick and perhaps a sweetener? This will be the last chance for the Raiders to show him off to contenders looking for an in-season upgrade.

WEEK 12

COMMANDERS AT CARDINALS

Sunday, Nov. 29, 4:25 p.m. ET

This is, on the surface, a Sonny Styles vs. Jeremiyah Love rookie showdown. The Commanders were, on paper at least, one of the worst defenses in the NFL last year and enter the 2026 season as such. So, I am marking this game on my own personal viewing calendar because I want to see how a versatile linebacker like Styles—who is billed as someone who makes Washington far less vulnerable against backs who can impact the passing game, like Love—tips the scales against ... Love himself.

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

WEEK 14

GIANTS AT SEAHAWKS

Sunday, Dec. 13, 4:25 p.m. ET

Brian Daboll never had an offensive line good enough to stop the onslaught. This was true when the Giants' QB was Daniel Jones, who tried to use his mobility to the point of self-destruction. This was true in the years the team was boasting about identity building at the position. New York spent the No. 10 pick on Miami's Francis Mauigoa, as the team continues to attempt a sea change in physicality (or mere capability) up front.

All of that is to say that this game will feature a new head coach, John Harbaugh, along with a new O-line coach (Mike Bloomgren), against a defensive front incredibly well-versed in dissecting a line player-by-player and exposing gaping weaknesses.

WEEK 15

49ERS AT CHARGERS

Thursday, Dec. 17, 8:15 p.m. ET

In the Prodigal Son Bowl, Mike McDaniel (now in place as the Chargers' offensive coordinator) will host former boss and mentor Kyle Shanahan with an offense that McDaniel may have conjured up in a NyQuil-induced fever dream. Los Angeles is nearly as deep as McDaniel's former Miami teams in terms of speed at the playmaking positions and is more formidable in terms of line depth, physicality and quarterback play. This will be the best set of tools at McDaniel's disposal since he coordinated the ground game for Shanahan's 49ers.

San Francisco, meanwhile, is doing in 2026 what they should have done in '25: pour loads of resources into the possibility that this is the last chance to win a Super Bowl with Christian McCaffrey, George Kittle and 38-year-old Trent Williams.

WEEK 16

RAMS AT SEAHAWKS

Friday, Dec. 25, 8:15 p.m. ET

The first rematch of last year's NFC title game (the second is in Week 18) will be a precursor to a playoff game, assuming both teams stay healthy. Seattle will have to endure something of an adjustment period under new OC Brian Fleury, while the Rams enter the season as a legitimate Super Bowl contender after making night-and-day improvements to their secondary.

SOMETHING TO PROVE McCaffrey (above) and Hurts face questions after coming up short in the playoffs, while Crosby (top) is hoping to show he's healthy.

WEEK 17

RAVENS AT BENGALS

Thursday, Dec. 31, 8:15 p.m. ET

I know this is a long way out to project a Bengals team as being relevant, given the injury history of quarterback Joe Burrow. That said, Cincinnati and Baltimore are the top two contenders to win the AFC North. So this New Year's Eve game could essentially be a win-and-in scenario similar to the Ravens-Steelers matchup in Week 18 last year.

The Bengals were one of my most clearly improved teams this offseason, and I think their rotational pass rush will challenge a newly rebuilt Ravens offensive line. Baltimore will be worth watching all season, having changed head coaches for the first time in nearly two decades (former Chargers DC Jesse Minter replaced Harbaugh). This will be a crucial test, assessing just how Minter's first campaign has gone. □

SCORECARD: HISTORY

HAZY DAYS

SOMETIMES THE ELEMENTS LEAVE ATHLETES AND FANS IN A FOG. LITERALLY

BY MARK BECHTEL

↑ DORES DASHED

On May 8, Braden Holcomb thought he had hit a ninth-inning, three-run homer to put Vanderbilt ahead of Missouri 9–7. No one saw the ball go over the fence, however, so the umpires ruled it a ground rule double to make the score 7–7. A Vandy fan, being a Vandy fan, took the launch angle and exit velocity and calculated that the ball traveled 379 feet—enough to clear the fence. SEC officials were unmoved by physics, and the Commodores lost the game when it was resumed the next day.

JUST PLAIN BATTY

In the first period of Game 3 of the 1975 Stanley Cup Final against the Flyers, Sabres forward Jim Lorentz killed a bat that swooped down from the rafters. That was only the second-oddest thing about the game. A cloud descended over the ice in Buffalo, requiring several stoppages as players and arena workers tried to dissipate it. "A good shot from the red line could have won it," said Philly goalie Bernie Parent, who conceded the game-winner in overtime on an goal from an incredibly tight angle.

LONDON SMOG

A 1937 soccer game between Chelsea and Charlton was stopped due to fog. Alas, Charlton's goalkeeper didn't get word and stayed on the field for more than 10 minutes under the assumption his teammates were dominating at the other end. (A policeman eventually located him and brought him in.) Eight years later, Arsenal took on Dynamo Moscow in another game with zero visibility. One Gunners player was given a red card but snuck back onto the pitch. The referee never noticed.

FROM TOP: MIZZOU ATHLETICS; JOHN D. HANLON

STRETCH RUN

No one doubted that Landing Officer crossed the line first in a January 1990 race in Louisiana. That doesn't mean the horse won. Jockey Sylvester Carmouche Jr. had parked the pony in the fog shortly after the start, then headed for the finish line when the other horses neared. What gave Carmouche away? Landing Officer was a 23–1 long shot and won by 24 lengths. He also didn't show up on a video of the race. "The cameras must have missed my horse," said Carmouche, who got a 10-year ban.

TROUBLE BRUIN

During Game 4 of the 1988 Stanley Cup Final, pockets of mist descended on the ice at Boston Garden, a building known for its sweltering heat. It added intrigue to the matchup between the Bruins and Oilers. Unlike fans in Buffalo 13 years earlier, though, the crowd in Boston didn't get to see a winner through the haze. With the score 3–3 late in the second period, the power went out in the Garden (and no, it didn't have air conditioning). The game was abandoned.

DON'T BLAME MOTHER NATURE

Not all disruptions are weather related. Last December a smoke and fog machine that had been used during pregame festivities malfunctioned during a Thunder-Jazz game in Salt Lake City, causing play to be stopped until someone was able to make it stop. (They unplugged it.) In what seems to be a trend, the fog wasn't the only strange occurrence that night. The scoreboard and game clock later stopped working, forcing the arena's PA announcer to give time and score updates.

SOUP BOWL

With visibility for much of the game around 20 yards, Eagles quarterback Randall Cunningham incredibly threw for 407 against the Bears in their 1988 NFC divisional playoff showdown. Alas, he couldn't find the end zone, and Chicago won 20–12. Fans had such a difficult time seeing anything on the field that thousands left their seats to watch on televisions in the Soldier Field concourse.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MELISSA MAJCHRZAK/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID E. KLUTHO; HEINZ KLUETMEIER

SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

STRUGGLE BUS

THE MANAGER'S WRITINGS SPICE UP A DOC ON FRANCE'S 2010 WORLD CUP WOES

BY MARK BECHTEL

WHEN IT comes to headlines that grab a reader's attention, you can do a lot worse than GO F--- YOURSELF, YOU DIRTY SON OF A BITCH! That's what the French sports publication *L'Equipe* chose (without the dashes) on June 19, 2010, two days after the country's soccer team was humbled in the World Cup by Mexico.

The words were allegedly uttered at halftime by mercurial striker Nicolas Anelka toward manager Raymond Domenech. Anelka was benched and ultimately sent home, which led his teammates to boycott practice and instead sulk on the team bus. It's considered the most scandalous event in the country's sporting history, and it's the basis of the Netflix documentary *The Bus*.

Domenech appears, as do several French players (but not Anelka). There's a consensus that Anelka never actually uttered the insult, but that's not the end of the story. What makes the doc compelling is that for years Domenech kept a diary, and he turned his World Cup journal over to the filmmakers. It's a bit juicy.

Domenech has always been atypical. At one club, he made it his mission to rid the squad of all its Scorpios. Here, his diary is full of choice words (several players are called idiots, and Thierry Henry is described as a navel-gazing Leo) and personal confessions that he's slowly losing it. As a result, *The Bus* doesn't really do the manager any favors. For the audience, though, it's a different story. □

FRENCH TOAST
Domenech got along more civilly with Anelka's replacement, Djibril Cisse, but the Cup dustup still cost the coach his job.

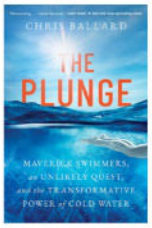
COLD-WATER swimming has a cardinal rule, writes Chris Ballard in *The Plunge*: Don't go at it alone. It's a dangerous activity, as evidenced by the number of times Ballard points out that competitions usually require a valid EKG.

"This has a side benefit: camaraderie," Ballard writes. "[Y]ou are, in essence, voluntarily entering a low-level crisis together."

People who do things like try to swim a mile in frigid water tend to be a little interesting, with personal histories to match, and Ballard's prose does them justice. There's also a scientific element, explaining why dousing yourself in cold water is good for you.

But the best part of the book is Ballard's own journey, as he immerses himself not only in cold water, but also in a rollicking community. □

READ



THE PLUNGE
by Chris Ballard

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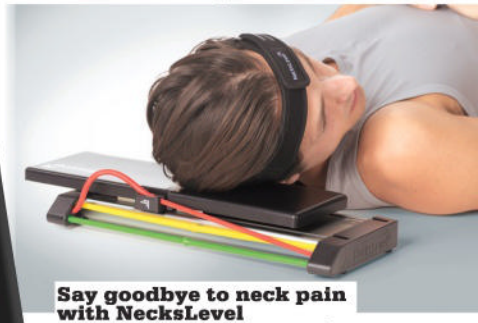

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FACES IN THE CROWD

BY DAN FALKENHEIM

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com.**

KOHEN GRANTOM ▸ Sport: Track and Field ▸ Hometown: Coahoma, Texas

Kohen, a sophomore at Coahoma High, broke the national high school record in the 400-meter wheelchair race with a time of 50.7 seconds to win the Class 3A-Region 1 championship. He also took the regional title in the 100-meter race. A 2025 USA Para High School All-American, Kohen earned state titles in the 100m and 400m last year and was named Male Athlete of the State Meet for the wheelchair division.

LINDSAY KIVLAN ▸ Sport: Acrobatics and Tumbling ▸ Hometown: Mars, Pa.

Kivlan, a freshman at Duquesne, scored a 9.800 on the open pass, a solo heat in which an athlete showcases their highest-level skills, to win the National Collegiate Acrobatics & Tumbling Association individual event title by 0.005 points. It was the final NCATA tournament before acrobatics and tumbling gains NCAA status in 2027. With her win, Kivlan became the Dukes' first individual national champion in any sport.

KOLBI FERGUSON ▸ Sport: Weightlifting ▸ Hometown: Lincolnton, Ga.

Ferguson, 24, won silver in the 110-kg division at the 2026 Pan American Weightlifting Championships in Panama City, Panama, setting U.S. records for his weight class in the clean and jerk (224 kg) and total (397 kg). A two-time senior world championships team member, he became the first U.S. athlete to sweep gold in the heavyweight category in 17 years at last year's Pan Ams.

WRESTLING

True Tale

▸ **BACK IN** February, a month before the NCAA wrestling championships, Aden Valencia wrote a story. The Stanford redshirt freshman *(near right)* condensed a six-month season into a seven-minute match for his fiction writing class. He modeled the protagonist after himself—a wrestler who needed to figure some things out—and had him win a title against Penn State's Shayne Van Ness.

His story wouldn't remain fiction for long. Valencia, the 10-seed, upset the No. 2 and 7 seeds, then took down the top-ranked Van Ness in the 149-pound final in overtime, becoming the first double-digit seed to win an NCAA wrestling title in a decade.

"I'm going to paint my story right now," he remembers thinking. "And I'm going to make it happen."

The three-time Junior Pan Am judo champ had questioned if his career was all for nothing after a midseason loss. Now? He is manifesting a different dream.

"I have an Olympic medal on my phone screen," the Morgan Hill, Calif., native says. "That's what I'm chasing right now." □

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF CHRIS JOSLIN; JOE SARGENT/DUQUESNE ATHLETICS; WILL EDMONDS/USA WRESTLING; JEFF LANGE/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

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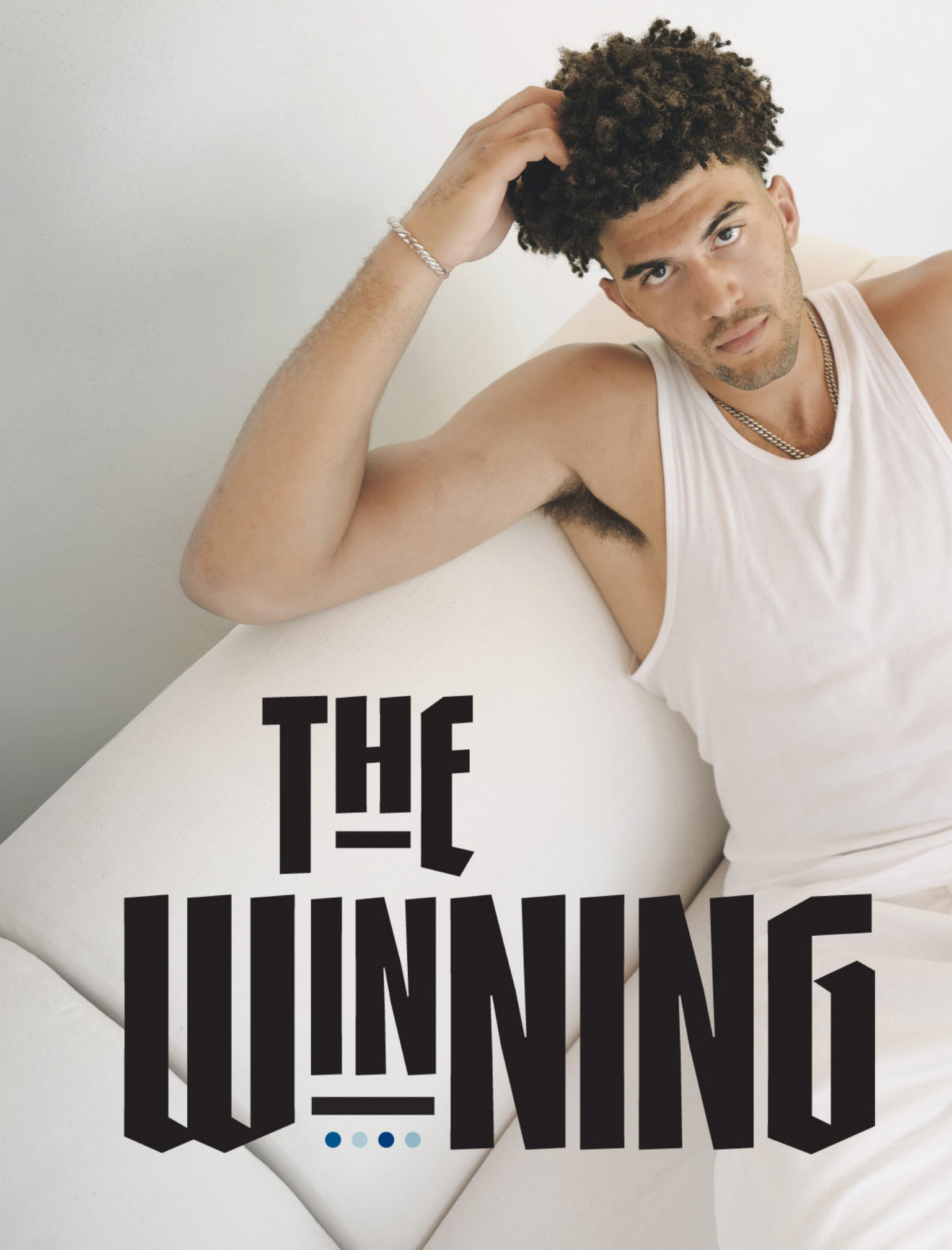
THE
WINNING

by BRYAN FISCHER

2026 NBA DRAFT PREVIEW

photograph by
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In the deepest draft class in two decades, the most accomplished prospect is **CAMERON BOOZER,** the son of an NBA All-Star who forged his own path thanks to his versatility and relentless competitiveness

BLUEPRINT

Cameron Boozer is, first and foremost, a winner.

Unrelentingly so, too, as he reaches a point that's almost hard to put into context. He may not physically look like a Monstar from *Space Jam*, but if you walk onto the court with him wearing the same jersey, you'll feel like you already have a 10-point lead before tip-off.

It is not misplaced hyperbole to claim that the 18-year-old—he'll turn 19 at the end of Summer League in July—is the most accomplished American basketball player entering the NBA draft in at least the past quarter century. Winning games, accolades and high praise come naturally to Boozer.

This is simply what he does on a court almost without thinking. Better than any of his peers about to be drafted. Better than last year's No. 1 pick, Cooper Flagg. Better than anything Paolo Banchero or Chet Holmgren accomplished prior to turning into young All-Stars. Highly sought-after Europeans join the NBA from vastly different upbringings, but even they could be shown all of Boozer's accomplishments and feel the need to tip their hats.

"Winning is a skill. I think it translates to any level. I think it's going to translate just fine [for me]," he says. "Winning is hard, which is why I say it's a skill. Not everyone can do it."

Certainly not to the degree that he has. Walking around Boozer's home in Miami, you have to look hard for signs that he is a serial winner or even

ROBIN ALAM/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

anything beyond a normal teenager who enjoys relaxing by the backyard pool with tight-knit friends and family members. There is no front-and-center trophy cabinet dedicated to his successes, possibly because it would be too difficult to confine them to just a single space.

Boozer went 114–14 at Christopher Columbus High in Miami—where he briefly overlapped with the top pick in the 2026 NFL draft, Heisman Trophy winner Fernando Mendoza—guiding the Explorers to four consecutive state titles in Florida's highest classification. His senior year was capped off with the school's first basketball national championship—a victory in the Chipotle Nationals tournament in which his team held off numerous big-time prep academies stocked with talent.

Devilishly Good

Boozer has been so dominant that the three losses he suffered at Duke brought his prep and college total to a mere 17.

Alongside his twin brother, Cayden, Boozer also secured two gold medals for USA Basketball's youth teams without dropping a single game. The pair's AAU outfit, Nightrydas Elite, was so dominant at the premier Nike EYBL Peach Jam tournament each summer that it became the first team to capture a championship across the three consecutive age levels it competed in. Boozer earned pretty much every prep award in

existence and became only the fourth player to twice be named the Gatorade National Player of the Year in boys basketball in the history of the award.

It was more of the same on Tobacco Road as he put together what is arguably the best freshman season men's college basketball has seen in the modern age. Duke won 35 games on its way to ACC regular-season and tournament titles, beat more Top 25 opponents than any other team in school history, earned the No. 1 overall seed in the NCAA men's tournament and lost just three times by a combined five points. Boozer was named a first-team All-American and swept every national player of the year honor after becoming the first underclassman since Larry Bird in 1976–77 to average better than 20 points, 10 rebounds and four assists in a season.

"Cam shows up to compete every game. There's the consistency there and then there's also knowing what's required to win," says Blue Devils coach Jon Scheyer. "He's a guy that scored a lot for us, he rebounded a lot, but there were some games where he got blocks, some games it was his passing. He's got a great understanding for what it takes and what that specific game needs in order to win."

As Boozer heads to a league where the teams likely to pick him aren't necessarily looking to compete for championships right away, will his overwhelming ability to win be simply brushed aside or properly factored into a franchise-changing pursuit of the best player?

The NBA's age-old debate about how much it values winning will be revived around the incoming crop of talent. Michael Jordan's six rings are often the first thing cited in comparison to LeBron James's lengthy legacy. Going back even farther, Bill Russell's 11 NBA titles were long held up against Wilt Chamberlain's impressive stats.

In most years, Boozer would be close to a lock to be the No. 1 pick and certainly would have been heavily favored as such had he stayed in school and come out for the next draft. That he isn't says quite a bit about how there are a few Chamberlains available to teams and just one bearing a résumé akin to Russell's.

The 2026 draft class has been labeled as one of the deepest and most talented of the past two decades. BYU's AJ Dybantsa has elite scoring ability to go along with prototypical size on the wing as one option for the Wizards with the first pick. Kansas guard Darryn Peterson may have an even higher ceiling, given his rare burst and feel for the game. North Carolina's Caleb Wilson, an AAU teammate of Boozer's, plays above the rim as well as anyone and has athleticism he has just barely tapped into.

While some analytically driven teams will place Boozer atop their list, not everyone will. If you were to strip away each likely lottery pick's history and drop them on a blacktop for a schoolyard draw, the Duke forward may well not be the first player selected by those focused solely on physical upside. That's despite Boozer having a longer wingspan than the slightly taller Wilson, or running the shuttle at the draft combine just as fast as the nimble Dybantsa, or shooting just as well as Peterson despite being four inches taller with 54 pounds on him.

He also has something innate and hard to measure—a sixth sense to do what it takes that has led to all those wins throughout his career.

A Duke game at the United Center in Chicago during the first month

"I'm a guy who you can plug and play anywhere," says Boozer. "I think my VERSATILITY IS ELITE. You can put me in a lot of different situations on the court."

Mettle on Display
Backed by their parents, Carlos and CeCe (above), Cameron (12) and twin Cayden (2) won four state championships in high school and two FIBA gold medals on USA Basketball youth teams.

of the season is one example. Arkansas led by seven with 10 minutes to play but was not double-teaming the Blue Devils star when he had the ball in his hands—a rare occurrence at any level. Scheyer made a concerted effort throughout the season to run inverted pick-and-rolls to highlight his best player's natural skill set, allowing the 6'9" freshman to handle the ball near the top of the key as the team's lengthy guards or wings arrived to set a screen. When that initial action wasn't forcing mismatches or favorable spacing for a good shot, a help defender would create an outlet for Boozer to casually find a shooter wide open for an easy assist.

Razorbacks coach John Calipari opted to play things more straight up. He was essentially gambling that it would be more difficult for one player to beat him time after time in a pressure-packed environment than it would be to allow Duke to get rolling on the offensive end with contributions from all over. Boozer called the bluff, scoring 35 points for the second time in two weeks and finishing 13 for 18 from the field.

"That was a game where I felt like I needed to take over," he says, labeling it as his best in college. "Sometimes the best thing to get the win is to be in attack mode. You've got to read a defense and go. Sometimes, there's no reads and you've just got to go figure out a way. At the end of the day, the competitive spirit to keep going and keep attacking just comes from *I wanted to win*."

In February against eventual national champion Michigan in Washington, D.C., a slightly different tactic was required during the sport's marquee nonconference matchup.

Boozer still had a scoring touch, with 18 points on 10 shots, but exemplified his all-around game as his team overcame a handful of early deficits and held on to win a close contest. He brought the ball up the court like a veteran point forward as Duke scored on every trip down the floor during the final three minutes. Navigating much of the second half with four fouls, he nearly pulled in a triple-double (settling for leading his team in all three categories).

"I'm a guy who you can plug and play anywhere," Boozer says. "I think you can play me at point guard. You want to slide me to the three or the four, whatever it is, I think my versatility is elite. You can put me in a lot of different situations on the court."

The end result tends to be the same regardless. Though he ascribes that as being a skill he has honed, how much of becoming a winner can be chalked up to genetic nature and how much of it comes down to hard-fought nurture over the years is interwoven. There's little doubt Boozer owes it to both, equally, as part of his upbringing as the son of Carlos Boozer, a 13-year NBA veteran and two-time All-Star.

"I wouldn't say I wanted to follow him, I would say I want to make my own path," Cameron says. "Most people come up to me now and they call me Cameron before they go, 'Oh, you're Boozer's kid.' I think [Cayden and I] already made our own names, but for a long time it wasn't like that.

"It's a blessing to come from a family like we do. My dad has been to where we want to go. I wouldn't say it's annoying at all. But as a competitor, as someone who wants to be great, you also want to have your own story."

CARVING OUT a lane on and off the court has been part of Boozer's ethos since he was little, especially with a brother barely a year older and a twin who made every day a competition at home.

That was the case whether the trio was playing ice hockey, football or soccer during grade school as much as it was playing cards or trying to jump highest on the trampoline.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE/GETTY IMAGES; JIM DEDMON/IMAGN IMAGES; ALI TAN GOCHER/HANS LUCAS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Cruise Control

Normally not flashy, Boozer took delivery of a Ford Raptor—which his mom called his "first big-boy purchase"—during his cover shoot. Scan the QR code to ride along in an exclusive SI video.

***Photograph by** Erik Clark*
***Styling creative direction by** Kesha McLeod of KMCME*
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***Watch by** Zenith*

"Winning is a skill. I think it's going to translate just fine [for me]," Boozer says. "WINNING IS HARD, which is why I say it's a skill. Not everyone can do it."

No matter what it involved or where it took place for the Boozers, there was an unvarnished pursuit of being the one to come out on top—the loser sometimes had to deal with blood, tears or a combination of both.

There was, thankfully for all involved, less of that in the backyard hoops games that Carlos fondly recalls providing a more direct education as to what to do between the lines of a basketball court.

"I don't think he feels the weight of the last name. I've felt that's more about public perception than it is true for him. He's always been his own man and wanted to run his own race," says his mom, CeCe Boozer, who is divorced from Carlos but was a mainstay alongside her ex-husband in the stands whenever and wherever Duke played last season. "He knows that from the outside, people may pick up those comparisons, but he sees himself so different than his father."

Cameron acknowledges certain aspects of his father's game are inherent in his own, particularly his footwork and interior presence. Scheyer, his college coach, sees those flashes when Boozer is around the rim and finishes with his left hand, something that he was encouraged to do more this past season because of how dominant his play was in the low post.

Still, Cameron is far more comfortable facing the basket or handling the ball than his father ever was—Carlos made a single three-pointer during the entirety of his NBA career while Cameron shot 39% from beyond the arc on 138 attempts (3.6 per game) at Duke. His passing stands out, too, be it amid double teams or during fast breaks: Only one other power-conference player in the NCAA taller than 6' 6" recorded more assists last season.

Part of that is the natural evolution of the game, but it can also be attributed to how much more advanced Cameron is entering the league after years of playing at a high level while getting access to training that most can only dream of.

Carlos not only heartily acknowledges this as an admiring parent but also as a professional, reflecting his role as a member of Utah's front office scouting college and overseas players. Given that the Jazz hold the No. 2 pick, Carlos will be asked for his opinion about

BOB DONNAN/IMAGN IMAGES

Top-3 Tussle

The Duke forward had the most prolific collegiate career compared to his draft class peers, but still can't firmly grasp the consensus nod as the No. 1 pick.

Cameron prior to draft night. Carlos insists it is not awkward amid a one-of-a-kind intersection of welcoming a second generation to the league.

"I'm privy to information most people wouldn't have about their son getting drafted. At the same time, they're going to do what they think is the best fit for the organization and where the team stands," Carlos says. "This is a unique draft with a ton of talent. There are some great players that have a chance to be the cornerstone of franchises for a very long time. Cam is definitely in that same breath as those kinds of players. The biggest thing for me is him going to a place where he can thrive, flourish and have a chance to succeed and win."

Both generations of Boozers are fully in sync on that. Cameron, in slight contrast to some players linked to the Wizards, downplays the significance of hearing his name called first by commissioner Adam Silver and insists primarily on finding the best fit. He portrays no hint of jealousy if others in the class get more attention.

"Whatever number, whatever spot, I just want to go to a great situation for me, where I can thrive and be the top player that I know I can be," Cameron says. "I want a staff that believes in me, believes in what I can do, is going to give me a freedom to adjust to the NBA, play through some mistakes and who really sees the vision of me being a great player in the league."

"I've been fortunate to see three No. 1 picks come through here in the last eight or nine years. Cam looks exactly like that, with the profile of player and person of the guys who have gone No. 1 overall in our program before," says Scheyer, whose school has sent 27 first-rounders to the NBA since he joined the Duke staff in 2013. "I also know, whether it's [being drafted] one, two or three, time will tell that Cam—who he is as a pro and what he's capable of—will shine through."

That seems most evident when Boozer discusses adjusting to the aspect of the NBA that might be most difficult to him: losing. Even when allowing that it's hard to win at the same rate in the pros as he has historically, Boozer notes 60 victories in the NBA still sounds like a whole lot of losing in an 82-game season.

If anything hasn't sunk in about being a pro basketball player from someone who has been around the game from birth, it's that.

"At the end of the season, one team at the end of the day is the winner. Being able to get there, to get to the top with a chance to compete, that's a skill and hard to do," he says, eyes radiating a familiar intensity. "I don't think it ever goes away. It's kind of hardwired into you to win."

Few know that better than a player whose résumé features little else. □

by
CHRIS MANNIX

Set to become the first Mexican-born player selected in the first round of the NBA draft, **Karim López** hopes his journey will ignite a new generation of basketball stars from his home country

PHIL WALTER/GETTY IMAGES

KARIM

OF THE CROP

Jamming Out
In his two NBL seasons, López established himself as a high-flying and physical wing.

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2026
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HERMOSILLO IS a bustling city in the northwestern Mexican state of Sonora, a desert metropolis 175-ish miles from the Arizona border. To locals it's considered something of a foodie nirvana, with street vendors dishing out buttery flour tortillas and bacon-wrapped hot dogs, serving a population that hovers around one million in a region where temperatures routinely reach triple digits. "That's part of what builds our character," says Karim López. "You've got to tough it out." As a kid, López spent countless sun-scorched afternoons in his driveway battling his uncles in games of one-on-one, playing until exhaustion. During the pandemic in 2020, López, then 13, was a fixture at a nearby public park, running sprints on the burnt, brown grass of a soccer field before spending hours in drills and pickup games on a blistering blacktop. "He knew what he wanted," says López's father, Hiram. "He had a dream and he was willing to work for it."

Hiram is familiar with the dream. Decades earlier, he had a similar one. Growing up in Hermosillo, Hiram can still remember the day his mother took him to his first indoor gym. The sounds of the ball hitting the wood, the squeaking sneakers, the crisp *snap* of shots going through the net. It began a journey that took him to a pair of U.S. colleges, the Mexican national team and 13 years playing pro ball in Mexico, as a burly, 6' 9" forward with a little bit of a mean streak. In 2012, he ruptured his right Achilles tendon. He had surgery, rehabbed for 10 months and resumed his career. In 2018, he popped his *other* Achilles. Again: Surgery, rehab, back on the floor. He smiles as he recalls it, seemingly realizing in real time how crazy it sounds. "I don't know," says Hiram. "I just had a real love for the game."

In Karim, Hiram sees that same passion. He never pushed basketball on him. Instead, he put him in everything: soccer, track, even taekwondo. But basketball just stuck. In the years Hiram played close to home, Karim would routinely tag along to practices or morning shootarounds. He would dribble a ball in the stands before games and sneak onto the floor to fire up shots after. When Karim was 8, Hiram enrolled him in his first basketball academy. "Because he wanted it," Hiram insists. When he was 10, his mother, Claudia, weary of being a full-time driver for Karim and his sister, Brianna, asked him to choose a sport. "And he didn't hesitate," says Hiram. "It was basketball. Thank God it worked out."

On June 23, López will hear his name called in the first round of the NBA draft. In some ways it's an unremarkable story: The 19-year-old López is a solid prospect, a sturdy, 6' 9", 225-pound wing with Thanos-sized hands who averaged 11.9 points per game in Australia's National Basketball League last season. Most mock drafts project him to go in the back end of the lottery. "He has that blend of size, physicality, feel for the game, the ability to play both ends," says Jonathan Givony, an NBA draft analyst for DraftExpress. "The big question is shooting. But he's a positionless player. That's just what everybody's looking for."

Here's what is remarkable: López will become the first Mexican-born player selected in the first round, joining Eduardo Nájera as the only Mexican-born players ever drafted. Nájera was a reliable role player who appeared in 619 games over 12 NBA seasons. López has

Street Dreams

As he built his love for the game as a child on Mexico's public courts, López envisioned a future in the NBA.

KOHJIRO KINNO

adidas
10

the potential to be much more. Coming from a country of 133 million people, is López the first of a new wave of Mexican basketball talent? Or a diamond in the rough unearthed by the right scouts?

MEXICO IS famed for its athletes. The country is known for its boxers (Julio César Chávez, Canelo Álvarez) and soccer, sorry *fútbol*, stars (Hugo Sánchez, Rafael Márquez), while last summer for the first time four Mexican-born players were selected for the MLB All-Star Game. Basketball, though, has been woefully underrepresented: Only four players (Nájera, Horacio Llamas, Gustavo Ayón and Jorge Gutiérrez) have cracked NBA rosters—and none since 2016.

When this is pointed out to him, López can only shrug. To him, Mexico *is* basketball country. Drive around Sonora, he says, and you will see "thousands of basketball courts, parks everywhere." A group of teenagers playing on one surface. A 40-something men's league battling on another. "It's truly amazing," says López. "And I think that passion really helped me, just seeing it every day."

When López was 8, his dad installed a basket in the driveway. On weekends, López's uncles, who were around six years older, came over to play pickup. If López jumped out to an early lead, his uncles would take him to the post and overpower him. "You learn to be physical," says López. When he was 12, the family moved to a new home. The driveway basket didn't make the trip, but there was a public park just a couple of minutes away. Just a half court with a metal hoop, no net. When he started shooting, he quickly noted the rim was about six inches lower than regulation. Not great for shooting drills, says López. "But," he adds, "it's where I first learned to dunk."

By 2020, López was pretty good. Decent handle. Strong legs. Improving shot. In March, when the pandemic ground everything to a halt, López seized the opportunity. In the mornings he would duck into a makeshift gym—or whatever you want to call an empty room with some three-pound hand weights, an exercise bike and a couple of resistance bands—and consume workout videos on YouTube. Jumping drills. Core work. When the family rolled out of bed at 7 a.m., Karim was often mid-workout.

While other top prospects headed to U.S. colleges, Lopez craved something different: "I wanted to get out of my comfort zone. I WANTED TO GET BETTER. I needed something to get me closer to my goal."

Big Bother
With his solid 6'9" frame and nearly 7-foot wingspan, Lopez can contest shots and disrupt opposing offenses.

Hiram took notice. Out of work, he suddenly found himself with free time. He challenged his son: *Do you want to get serious?* Karim agreed. They mapped out a plan. Strength and conditioning in the morning, 5:30 a.m., sharp. Agility training, sprints, change-of-direction drills. Afternoons, they played pickup. Hiram would call around for players, mostly older kids. He wanted opponents who were bigger, stronger and faster than his son. "He never forced anything on me," says Karim. "I wanted to do it. But he made me work."

It paid off. As the year wound down, López had demonstrably improved. Around the same time, López experienced a growth spurt, sprouting from 5'8" to 6'2". Suddenly, his size matched his skills. In '21, as

HANNAH PETERS/GETTY IMAGES

the world surged back to life, López competed in a national team tournament in Aguascalientes. Over several games, he says, "I balled out." He shot threes. He ran fast breaks. He dunked. Kids he used to consider his competition couldn't match up with him.

"My game had evolved a lot," says López. "I was good, but I wasn't standing out or nothing. And then we came back and I was looking at other kids like, '*Oh, what happened to him?*' I wouldn't say everybody got worse, but I just got exponentially better. And everybody was kind of shocked."

Among them: International scouts. In attendance for the tournament was one from Spain. López spotted him in the stands early. "I was trying to show out," he says. As basketball evolved into a bigger part of his life, López knew he needed to get out of Mexico. The Spanish scout was impressed. He sent López's tapes to several teams. Joventut Badalona, whose alumni include ex-NBA guard Ricky Rubio, was one of them. The club invited López in for a workout. After a couple of failed trips to the airport—international travel post-pandemic required a lot of paperwork—López made it over. A week later, the 14-year-old had an offer to play there.

The next three years were a blur. In Badalona, López shared a house with his teammates. Six kids, with a tutor around to supervise. It was a United Nations for teenagers. There was a kid from Belgium. Another from the Netherlands. A Croatian stayed there for a while. They played video games. Tried different foods. French was a popular language in the house, so López picked up a few words "in case they were talking smack about someone. [Or] about me." The Croatian became one of his best friends. "I like languages," says López in near flawless English. "I think I'm pretty good at them."

PHIL WALTER/GETTY IMAGES

Living Down Under
During his time with the New Zealand Breakers, López sharpened his skills, built a strong routine and strengthened his bond with his father.

Mostly, though, it was about basketball. Practices started late, around 5:30 p.m. Two hours with the U-16 team. Then another two with the U-18s before hitting the weight room. After a year, López started practicing with the senior team. In an early scrimmage, he found himself with an open lane in transition. When he elevated to dunk, a teammate leveled him, sending his head bouncing off the base of the stanchion. No whistle. Play on. "Those practices," says López, "made me tougher."

By 2023, the NBA was squarely on López's mind. He followed AJ Dybantsa and Darryn Peterson, top prospects he had played against in the FIBA U-16 Americas Championship. They were headed to U.S. colleges. López was looking for something different. "A competitive advantage," says Hiram. That summer, the Australian league reached out. The Aussie "Next Star" program—which recruits top overseas players—wanted him. To López, it was a perfect fit. "I wanted to get out of my comfort zone," says López. "I wanted to get better. I needed something to get me closer to my goal."

In recent years, the NBL had become a pipeline for NBA talent, with alumni including LaMelo Ball and Josh Giddey. Teams played fast. They were physical. After signing, López was allocated to the New Zealand Breakers, whose head coach was Petteri Koponen, a Finnish ex-sharpshooter who was drafted in the first round by the 76ers in 2007. "It's intense," says Justin Tatum, the head coach of the Illawarra Hawks. "In a 33-game season, every game means something. It's not the NBA, but the guys here are really freaking good."

The adjustment wasn't easy. The Breakers were the only team in the league not based in Australia. That meant regular five-plus-hour commercial flights. Luxury was landing a seat in the exit row. Still,

the experience proved educational. From older teammates, he learned about taking care of his body. About the importance of hydration. About eating a high-protein diet. He invested in compression boots to help with his blood flow.

In an NBA-style system, López thrived. Last season he set the single-season points record (358) for draft-eligible Next Stars. He tied the record for total steals and blocks (66). He dropped 32 points in a January win over Melbourne and helped the Breakers win the Ignite Cup, the league's in-season tournament. "He has a confidence about him," says Tatum. "And he's a constant competitor."

Tatum likens López to the Thompson twins, Amen and Ausar, two relentless, athletic wings who now play for the Rockets and the Pistons, respectively. "He gets the ball, pushes it downhill and finds a way to finish at the rim," says Tatum. "He's not afraid of the moment." Tatum has seen that swagger before: In his son, Jayson, the Celtics' All-NBA forward. "You got the ones who are cocky that haven't done anything, but then you have the ones who are like, 'I have to believe in myself because I put the work in,'" says Tatum. "That's Karim. He has that type of confidence."

For López, New Zealand offered something else: A chance to bond with his father. Karim and Hiram always had a good relationship. But the peripatetic life of a professional basketball player often kept them apart. When Hiram retired for good in 2022, Karim was living in Spain. When he signed with the NBL, Hiram went with him. They lived together. On days off, they would hang out at the beach. "We became real friends," says Karim. Shortly after his first season started, a welcoming local Mexican restaurateur reached out. The father and son became regulars, feasting on tacos, enchiladas and ceviche. In Karim's second season, the visits got less frequent. All that Mexican food didn't align with his strict diet. "He's so conscious of all of it," says Hiram. "You got to be a little crazy to make the NBA. He checks all the boxes."

THE QUESTION seemed benign enough: *Was the emergence of López a sign of basketball's growth in Mexico?* "I disagree with that assessment," says Eduardo Nájera. It's mid-May and Nájera is speaking from Chihuahua, his hometown, where he just wrapped up a kids' hoops camp. Nájera grew up wanting to play baseball, like his father, a power-hitting first baseman. As a high school freshman, Nájera stood 6' 8". His baseball coach told him to try

FROM LEFT: BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; J. DENNIS EINSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; GARY DINEEN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

Small circle

Llamas, Ayón, Gutiérrez and Nájera (from left) are the only Mexican-born players ever to make NBA rosters.

BOB ROSATO

"I was an anomaly," says Nájera. "So is Karim. The GROWTH IN MEXICO is just starting... We need role models."

a different sport. Basketball was it. A few years as an exchange student in San Antonio led to a scholarship offer at Oklahoma, where he played well enough to be drafted 38th overall by Houston in 2000. "I was an anomaly," says Nájera. "So is Karim. The growth in Mexico is just starting."

Basketball in Mexico needs infrastructure, Nájera says. The country treats sports like a public service. "In the U.S., it's an industry," he says. Businesses invest in coaches and platforms and facilities. In Mexico, it's all government funded. And it's not enough. There is a need for more camps. For better leagues. For more refurbished courts. There shouldn't be one Karim López, Nájera says. There should be seven to 10 competing for NBA spots.

The NBA is doing its part. The league has had boots on the ground since 2009, when it opened its first regional office. In 2021, the Mexico City Capitanes debuted as part of the G League. The NBA has played 34 games in Mexico—where they regularly sell out the arena—with another slated for November. It hosts camps, runs junior programs and blasts out content through broadcast and streaming partners. No one loves untapped markets more than commissioner Adam Silver, and basketball-starved Mexico, with 33 million NBA fans by league estimates, is one.

López can help tap it. "We need role models," Nájera says. He did his part during his NBA career and continues to, digging into his own pocket to run programs while pitching business leaders for more. A potential All-Star with Mexican roots, Nájera notes, could inspire a generation. The more success López has, the more pressure will fall on the government to beef up its investment in the sport. "Then the media starts talking about why we don't have more Karim Lópezes," says Nájera. "And it builds from there."

For his part, López doesn't shy away from the responsibility. He still remembers the driveways, the parks, the hours in the sweltering heat shooting on 9½-foot rims.

"I want to show people that come from the same situation I come from that it's possible," says López. Not just the NBA, he says. Baseball, soccer, running a construction company. Whatever it is, he wants to be proof that it's achievable. "That there's someone that's just like them, had the same struggles, and [still made] it," says López. "That's what really motivates me." □

MOCK DRAFT

A deep lottery class could see Washington pick up a cornerstone and OKC get bigger

by KEVIN SWEENEY

1

WIZARDS

AJ DYBANTSA

BYU

The 6'9" wing, a dynamic athlete who can create his own shot and score at an elite level, showed growth as a decision-maker in his lone year of college.

2

JAZZ

DARRYN PETERSON

KANSAS

The 6'5" guard has drawn strong marks for his competitiveness, work ethic and desire to play in spite of a season of health bumps (11 missed games).

7

KINGS

MIKEL BROWN JR.

LOUISVILLE

Brown may have the highest ceiling of the point guards in this draft class given his size, explosiveness and shooting potential.

8

HAWKS

KINGSTON FLEMINGS

HOUSTON

His speed, defensive intensity and passing wowed scouts, but there are concerns if he'll be a consistent a threat from beyond the arc.

9

MAVERICKS

BRAYDEN BURRIES

ARIZONA

One of the best scorers in college hoops, the combo guard can create his own shot or space the floor off the ball—and proved to be an effective defender.

10

BUCKS

NATE AMENT

TENNESSEE

The lanky 6'10" wing averaged 16.7 points per game but at times struggled with the physicality of the SEC and needs to add strength.

LEFT TO RIGHT: FROM TOP: ERICK W. RASCO-JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES; JAMIE RHODES/IMAGN IMAGES; KENNETH RICHMOND/GETTY IMAGES; ARYANNA FRANK/IMAGN IMAGES; ANGELINA ALCANTAR/NEWS SENTINEL/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

3

GRIZZLIES

CAMERON BOOZER

DUKE

The national player of the year is the ultimate winner, stacking unbelievably consistent production and team success throughout his career.

4

BULLS

CALEB WILSON

NORTH CAROLINA

A pair of hand injuries shut him down in February, but the 6'10" forward made an impression on scouts with his fierce athleticism and high motor.

5

CLIPPERS

KEATON WAGLER

ILLINOIS

The 6'5" guard doesn't play above the rim but is a special shooter off the bounce who has made strides in his ability to create space for himself.

6

NETS

DARIUS ACUFF JR.

ARKANSAS

The first high-major player to average at least 23 points and six assists since Trae Young can score efficiently against the NBA's best defenses.

11

WARRIORS

YAXEL LENDEBORG

MICHIGAN

The 6'9" forward, who can guard up and down the lineup and will turn 24 before the season, is one of the most game-ready prospects in the class.

12

THUNDER

ADAY MARA

MICHIGAN

The 7'3" big man (who has a standing reach of 9'9") could be a game-changer off the bounce thanks to his ability to protect the rim.

HEAT

LABARON PHILON JR.

ALABAMA

The dynamic point guard thrived in the Tide's fast-paced offense and is electric in the open floor, gifts that could make a major impact in Miami.

14

HORNETS

KARIM LÓPEZ

NZ BREAKERS

The ready-made role player has great size at 6'9", defensive versatility and shooting upside with two pro seasons under his belt as a 19-year-old.

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: BOB DONNAN/IMAGN IMAGES (2); MARIA LYSAKER/IMAGN IMAGES; WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES; JUNFU HAN/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; AARON J. THORNTON/GETTY IMAGES; GARY COSBY JR./TUSCALOOSA NEWS/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; STEVE BELL/GETTY IMAGES

FRENCH REVOLUTION

The Storm's young center, **DOMINIQUE MALONGA,** entered her second WNBA season as the future of the franchise and a promising talent. But the international phenom did not always see basketball as her calling

UTION

EYE OF THE STORM

Despite being just 19 years old and widely unknown in the U.S., Malonga (near left) was drafted No. 2 in 2025.

by **GREG BISHOP**

CANDACE WARD/IMAGN IMAGES

LONG BEFORE Dominique Malonga became a critical element of the Storm's rebuild ... before she started dunking in games (as a teenager!) ... before she was *born*, Malonga was playing basketball.

Her mother, Agathe N'Nindjem-Yolemp, competed professionally in Europe for more than a decade. Mom was a physical 6' 4" center. Mom grabbed boards. Mom suffocated opponents on defense.

Mom was Dominique's first teammate.

For the 2004–05 season, N'Nindjem-Yolemp went to Spain, joining a team in Valencia. She hadn't reached the midpoint of her career yet. But she needed a break. She's not entirely sure why. She just remembers repeating the same prayer almost every night: "God, I just need something to stop basketball *right now*."

At 25, she got pregnant with a fourth child. This baby would be fed basketball, same as all the others. Inadvertently, Dom gave her mother the desired break that season. But not before N'Nindjem-Yolemp competed for five months with a baby growing in her belly.

In the Malonga basketball universe, this all makes perfect sense. N'Nindjem-Yolemp met Dom's father, Thalance Malonga, in Cameroon some 30 years ago. Thalance, who played semi-professionally, was born in France but studied in Africa. (Picture this next part as if delivered by a narrator.) Thalance speaks with a deep baritone, rich and soothing, every word measured.

Basketball is in our blood, is our tradition.

Every child was born into a basketball family.

ONE AFTERNOON, when Dom was 11 or maybe 12, she and two siblings went to a court near their home in Le Chesnay, about 13 miles west of Paris. The plan: hoist some jumpers, have some fun. Then another kid showed up. Malonga can't remember if he was alone or with a crew. She does recall his skill set, best described then and now as *vast*. This was just park basketball, informal, goofing off. But this kid! She couldn't guard him. He scored at will. She didn't score a single point. His game, his fluidity, at that size, well, all Malonga can say now is, "It just messed with my eyes."

She wasn't alone in drawing that conclusion. This kid would grow to 7' 4", 235 pounds; would go first in the 2023 NBA draft; would realize, while still a teenager, the superstardom for which he had been destined. His name was Victor Wembanyama.

He was a basketball prodigy.

She—despite all her family's history suggesting otherwise—was not. Malonga wouldn't consider following her mother's career path for another year.

Malonga's parents still half-jokingly refer to her as their "blessed child." She was born with a congenital condition called laryngomalacia, which doctors often refer to as "noisy breathing." This forced an immediate, monthlong hospital stay. Both parents worried, but Malonga healed quickly.

As she grew up, everything came easily. Still does. Malonga loved school. Loved to draw and escape into anime, sketching her favorite characters. Loved to read, especially psychological thrillers. Took piano lessons. Taught herself songs by watching YouTube. Even then, she admits that she was, "I won't say a really, really hardworking child." The response, given her bona fides, is laughter. Malonga clarifies immediately: "No, really."

Her path to an international basketball career: Circuitous. Born in Cameroon. Lived in France while N'Nindjem-Yolemp was still playing. Went back and forth—and often. When her mom retired in 2012, the family moved back to Cameroon. Her parents opened a training academy, in order to, Thalance says, "transfer [our] heritage of basketball to young people"—and on a continent he still believes desperately needs exactly that. Their children went to almost every training session. "But," says Dom, "I wasn't really into it."

THE ACCIDENTAL prodigy is asked if there is one moment—something, anything—that pointed her toward basketball. She thinks. And thinks. Buys time.

"Not really," is her response.

This is the closest thing Malonga has to an origin story. The family moved back to France in 2016. After her 13th birthday, many who knew basketball and made careers in the sport all sounded the same theme, that her potential far exceeded her nonexistent career expectations.

SOPHOMORE STANDOUT

Malonga has already been tapped as a candidate for Most Improved Player this year. She had 21 points, eight rebounds and two blocks in her season debut.

JORDAN NAHOLOWAA MURPH; HAIR BY TANYA JOSEPH; MAKEUP BY CHANEL ARIELLE

SEATTLE
74

That got Malonga's brain churning. She'd always enjoyed playing basketball. She'd just never enjoyed watching or reading about it. Soon, France's top training program, INSEP, offered her the chance to develop her game and remain in school. Its leaders told her she was meant for basketball. "You gotta start believing," her coaches said.

She joined INSEP, which is the closest French equivalent to American college basketball, before her last year of middle school. They train, practice (twice a day), play and study—nothing else.

Despite her age, even on that first day, her mindset had already completely shifted. Basketball wouldn't become her life. But it would become her main focus, to see how far she could go. She would approach development with understated, clinical, typhoon-like force.

For two years, Malonga practiced and honed a disciplined training schedule. That came naturally to her, too. She loved every part of this newfound hoops-first paradigm. Then, Tony Parker called. Yes, the NBA Hall of Famer. No, she did not expect that.

It was really him. Parker had seen her play and wanted her to join another academy—his. Parker, one of France's most transcendent sports stars, wanted the accidental prodigy to turn pro. And not just soon or down the road. He wanted her to turn pro, right then. *At 15.*

Parker was comparing Malonga to the prodigy who had decimated her in that friendly pickup game at their local park. His comparison stuck, immediately, which only bolstered her self-confidence. *If Tony Parker says that about me, it might be true,* she told herself.

Malonga immediately enrolled at the Tony Parker Adéquat Academy and moved to Lyon in 2021. She joined ASVEL Féminin and spent two years there alongside many of France's top female hoopers.

That team would loan Malonga to another outfit in France's First Division, its highest level of basketball competition. Tarbes Gespe Bigorre was not a perennial playoff contender but had finished closer to the postseason the previous year. Most of her teammates weren't as young as she was. But they were also just beginning their pro careers.

Their squad wasn't expected to make the playoffs but did, and also made the French Cup semifinals. Malonga was named the league's Best Young Player and one of its five best players, regardless of age.

Four pro seasons in her teens taught Malonga how to approach a game like a job. She became more versatile, in lockstep with her understanding of basketball's technical nuances, like how to set a proper screen. She summoned fluid movements more naturally each week. And discovered she already possessed great hands.

The Wemby comps no longer seemed so far-fetched.

MALONGA'S FULL embrace of basketball created ever-deepening connections to the game. She found out she'd been selected for Olympic competition about two weeks before the 2024 Paris Games and was the youngest player on France's roster. "The best basketball experience of my life," she says.

"Right now," she adds, quietly and quickly. She does add that, though, and the subtext, of what's possible, is the important part.

This transformative portion of her career began on April 14, 2025, when the Storm drafted her with the No. 2 pick. All the Malongas gathered in New York City. Thalance still can't find words to describe that night, spent inside the WNBA's green room, everyone together, same as always, and yet entirely different than ever before.

The family celebrated with a quiet dinner. "It's *happening*," she told them.

Malonga had never visited Seattle, didn't know anything about Seattle. Couldn't find it on a map. She did not yet understand the Emerald City and its infatuation with women's basketball. The Storm franchise, run by an all-female ownership group. Attendance, essentially locked. City and future superstar, the fit,

"It started to be really fun for me, because I changed my mindset. I really worked for [this]," Malonga says. "But I didn't plan it."

FROM LEFT: SEAN D. ELLIOT/GETTY IMAGES; ARMAND LENOIR/FIBA/GETTY IMAGES

like a glove—and not to be confused with The Glove, Gary Payton, another dominant basketball force who called Seattle home.

Her rookie season felt like one giant blur. Malonga adjusted to the pace of WNBA basketball and the league's travel schedule—more games than she'd ever played (she was used to just a game a week in France), which robbed her of the practice time she needed. She set out to add "tools to my bag," she says—post moves, pick-and-roll expertise, rhythm and flow. And she began working with a sports psychologist, focusing on breathing techniques. She made the WNBA All-Rookie team and her 55.1% field goal percentage was eighth in the league.

That massive commitment to basketball remains. This winter, she stayed stateside and joined Unrivaled. Its three-on-three format forced her to create shots with ball in hand, to carve space and twist her body and charge at or slip by opponents. Her rhythm felt even more natural afterward. Malonga created better scoring opps for herself and teammates, while bolstering her one-on-one defense. Malonga says she gained physicality this winter and perfected rolling off screens, too. "It started to be really fun for me," she says. "Because I changed my mindset.

"I really worked for [this]. But I didn't plan it at all."

MALONGA EXITS an SUV in downtown Seattle and strolls into a café. It's the best kind of spring afternoon—that strange yellow orb makes a rare, glorious appearance overhead.

Inside Mirabelle by Orphée, Malonga is greeted by name, in French, with hugs. She would never say this next sentence. But Dom *knows the owner*. She discovered Mirabelle on an endless search for the best French food in Greater Seattle. Plus, Parisians consider croissants essential items, more water than breakfast.

"Like a little religion," she says.

For unnecessary proof, Malonga, 20, orders four favorites for the table—three pastries (croissant, chausson aux pommes, kouign-amann) and a ham-and-cheese baguette. Her explanation of the order unspools like a college thesis paper, heavy on details and history. (For the record: delicious.)

Her parents long ago developed what Thalance describes as an "image" for each of their six children. Those images formed from individual interests,

ARC DE TRIOMPHE

Malonga first went viral for dunking at practice at 16; she most recently slammed three times during Unrivaled play and then in a World Cup qualifier in March (near left).

aptitudes, dreams. "It is a vision," Thalance says. "A global vision for the future."

Malonga's parents have standards, and those standards are exacting. Beyond that, they're adaptable and supportive. In their own careers, her parents played sports, trained athletes, became doctors and entered politics. "My parents," she says, "had like 10 lives."

They see their daughter, her success and her potential, and they also consider future aims, which are international in scope. That's a college degree. That's more Storm championships. (The franchise has won four, while showcasing some of the league's best players: Sue Bird, Lauren Jackson, Jewell Loyd, Breanna Stewart.) That's a statue in Seattle for her exploits, just like Bird. And that's Dom, that's all their children, returning to Africa.

That's where her parents believe Malonga's largest future impact lies, in amplifying women's basketball in Cameroon and throughout Africa. But Malonga's not thinking like her parents, not considering statues or intercontinental impacts. She'll compare where she is to what they'd all mapped out when she pivoted her focus to basketball seven years ago. That's proof of concept. *Imagine what it's going to be like?,* Malonga will ask herself.

She's already working on completing her computer science degree through online classes. One current class focuses on digital communities and digital literacy. "Basically," she says, "it's kind of boring, but I love it!" For their next project, students will analyze a specific community. Hers: sports fandoms. A case study, in other words, within a case study—her career. Specifically, where it's headed.

Malonga didn't rush her rookie year. She notched two double-doubles in last season's playoffs against Las Vegas. How about 20 more of those? Or half that many dunks—she had three this winter in Unrivaled.

This season Malonga aims to be more aggressive. She wants to create space for teammates, fashion her own scoring opps and continue her other studies—the on-court dissertation.

She will need to. After the Storm's top five players from last season left in free agency, the team has stepped into a new era. Seattle used its No. 3 pick on Awa Fam, a 6'4" post player from Spain, and re-signed Ezi Magbegor, a veteran 6'4" forward/center. (Talk about a towering front-court.) Team brass also got Flau'jae Johnson, LSU's star player and a Roc Nation–signed rapper, on draft night.

At the center of it all is Malonga, who had two 21-point performances in the season's first week (she averaged 7.7 last year). And yes, she watches basketball now. But only because she must. Part of the gig.

On the night she joined the WNBA, Malonga felt ... *joy.* For her family, career, ambitions. For the present and the future. She has hardly begun to realize her potential, let alone whatever her top potential will look like.

Soon, more fans across the world will love her as Malonga continues to broaden her impact. And yet, she herself says she won't work in basketball after she retires. Malonga loves a lot of things. And she doesn't achieve anything by accident. □

FROM LEFT: DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO

TRAVELING ACT
Clark has played all over during her WNBA career, with two stops (and titles) in Seattle, a title in Vegas, two stints in D.C. and now in Dallas (left to right).

A

ALYSHA CLARK can measure her WNBA career in points, games and championships. But there is nothing that marks the passage of time quite like her 15-year-old Chihuahua, Sly.

She adopted him when she was desperate to land her first roster spot and he was just a puppy. Now, he's "a little deaf and a little blind," Clark affectionately says at her 16th training camp.

The two of them have seen the WNBA through striking change, including with a landmark new CBA.

Clark, 38, is the oldest player in the WNBA. It took her years to crack a roster. She is the last player standing from the 2010 draft class, with a career built on thankless defensive work, and she is now the resident veteran on a young, fun Wings roster.

"She's been around so long and seen the league through so many different

UNDER HER WING

by
EMMA BACCELLIERI

From the bargaining table to the court, quintessential role player Alysha Clark has helped drive the WNBA's metamorphosis

iterations," says Dallas coach Jose Fernandez. "She's just been very, very impressive in every single way."

It did not occur to Clark that she might play in the WNBA until she was almost finished at Middle Tennessee. She was selected in the second round by the San Antonio Silver Stars. What she did not grasp was how much of a grind it would be to make her league debut.

She was waived by the team on the final day of training camp in both 2010 and '11. She played overseas in Israel and began thinking about how a basketball career might look without a spot in the WNBA.

"I couldn't even fathom that this would be my livelihood, the way I would make my living," Clark says now. "I had no idea."

She returned for a third training camp in 2012 with the Storm. She made the opening day roster, but executives were up-front that some cuts would happen following the 2012 Olympics, and she would be first in line.

Clark had made it to the league and been given a potential expiration date at the same time.

And so she began cultivating the skills that would define her career. In college, she was a dominant frontcourt presence and a remarkably efficient scorer in the paint at just 5'11". (She averaged 28.3 points per game as a senior on 61.4% shooting.) But Clark realized this wouldn't translate in the pros and dedicated herself to being a master of the little things—a versatile defender, a capable screener, a player constantly studying and volunteering to do the dirty work. She spent most of her time on the bench, but she lasted the whole 2012 season with the Storm.

Clark wasn't a regular starter until 2015. She started every playoff game of Seattle's championship runs in 2018 and 2020. She demonstrated how vital players like herself could be to the league. She picked up more playing time, All-WNBA defensive honors and finally her first major individual award: Clark was named WNBA Sixth Player of the Year with the Aces in 2023. She was 36.

If her career felt like it could be a children's book about the power of perseverance, Clark also saw it as a statement about what might happen if players could prove themselves. The WNBA's historically low pay and fierce roster competition made that difficult.

Clark decided she wanted to help change this. She became a team union representative in 2018. In 2023, eyeing what could be a potentially huge negotiation for a new CBA, she decided to run for the executive committee as a union VP.

"I know what it feels like to be at the bottom," Clark says. "There's no other player here who has the firsthand experience of not making a roster, of being last on the bench, to playing a little bit off the bench, to then becoming a crucial impact role player. … I wanted to be a voice for the players like me."

The WNBPA was representing players who had made themselves household names and those who might spend only days on a roster. To help organize a group this large and with this many disparate interests was not so different from being a glue player tapped into everyone in the locker room. It was a role that Clark knew well. This was just much, much bigger, and with much more at stake.

Most of the discussions surrounding the eventual CBA focused on the big numbers. But the smaller numbers and more practical benefits are what sparked the most pride for Clark. Now, the minimum salary is $270,000. Retired players have access to league benefits. Every team has two developmental roster spots for young players. In short, there are more opportunities for players to stick in the league, and those opportunities are far more lucrative and secure.

There will always be players grinding for roster spots and grappling with disappointment on the final day of training camp. But their experiences will look markedly different.

"It means everything to know that these players coming in aren't going to have to have the same struggles," Clark says. "That's what it's about, right? Any time someone is pursuing change … that's what you want. You want them not to know the same struggles that you did." □

FROM LEFT: HANNAH FOSLIEN/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL GONZALES/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

photograph by
TAYLOR BALLANTYNE

Like her equine champion Golden Tempo, **CHERIE DEVAUX**, the first female trainer to win the Kentucky Derby, may have surprised many with her success. But she never wavered on her drive for racing's top prize

by **PAT FORDE**

SHE DID IT

HER WAY

GUIDING LIGHTLY
Careful not to ask too much of Golden Tempo too soon, DeVaux made sure every race enabled the horse to peak on May 2.

GOLDEN RUSH

Running last around the final turn, Golden Tempo, a 23–1 shot, charged through the field in a wild stretch run to take the victory in the final five strides.

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

CHERIE DEVAUX is exhausted but hiding it well, running on Diet Coke and euphoria after a life-altering two minutes and two seconds in Louisville. Six days later, after being on the *Today* show and throwing out an opening pitch in Yankee Stadium and greeting a fresh media wave every morning outside Keeneland Race Course's Barn 62, she rests her forearms on her desk and laughs at everything that has happened since the first Saturday in May.

"I don't really think I'm that big of a deal, so it's been very surreal," she says. "Al Roker asked if he could have his picture with me. I was like, *Are you kidding me? You're asking me? Come on, man. You're the famous one. I just watch horses go around in a circle*."

One of the 120 horses in her care went around in a circle more memorably than any of the others on May 2, creating the ongoing ruckus. He's down the shed row in Stall 29, poking his head out to socialize with his stablemates and play with the red rubber ball tethered to the wall. Like all the horses in DeVaux's barn, he has his name written in black Sharpie on silver electrical tape stuck to the cinder blocks: GOLDEN TEMPO.

The colt's last-to-first charge to win the Kentucky Derby at 23–1 odds delivered a bundle of resounding storylines at once. It decided one of the wildest stretch drives in the 152-year history of the race, with four different horses looking like the winner in the final 220 yards; it gave jockey Jose Ortiz a neck-length victory over his big brother, Irad, who was riding morning-line favorite Renegade; and, oh yeah, it made DeVaux the first female trainer to win America's greatest horse race. And she did it in her first attempt.

The pioneering element was a natural hook—"The Sport of Kings has its Queen," social media posts quickly declared. But the other dynamic that catapulted DeVaux from racetrack famous to mainstream famous was her unrestrained reaction to the dramatic Derby finish. She lost herself in the moment—pounding the wall she was leaning against, jumping up and down, screaming "Oh my God!" and then nearly buckling to the ground. A lifelong dream and a six-month vision with Golden Tempo came out of the clouds in a matter of seconds.

"It's very rare that a plan works out without any hiccups," DeVaux says. "The objective was to win the Kentucky Derby and it effing worked out amazingly. And when I was saying, 'Oh my God,' and I kind of collapsed, that was the whole weight of it. Like, *Holy s---, that happened very quickly.* It's amazing how fast your brain works, but all of that just kind of flooded in."

Then the emotion flooded out, in one of the greatest just-won-the-Derby reactions of all time. If the sweetest moment ever was trainer Carl Nafzger calling the stretch run for 92-year-old owner Frances Genter as their colt, Unbridled, won the 1990 Derby, then DeVaux's reaction was arguably the most real. (She would like to clarify one thing she said on video amid the celebration: "I did not, in fact, pee my pants.") But while the sporting world was falling in love with her, it would be simplistic, patronizing and frankly inaccurate to label Cherie DeVaux America's sweetheart.

"She's not afraid to motherf--- anyone," says her younger sister, Adrianne, also a thoroughbred trainer. "If she sees something that's wrong, she will call it out. She does things the right way. Once you get to know her, she will give you the shirt off her back. But man, she can kind of be a bitch. I love her to death, but any of her siblings would say the same thing."

Case in point from her days as an assistant trainer under Chad Brown: DeVaux was on a companion pony with standout mare Stephanie's Kitten one morning in 2015 when Triple Crown winner American Pharoah came out to the track for a gallop. A cameraman told DeVaux to move because she was ruining his shot of Pharoah.

"Excuse me, motherf----er," DeVaux says she responded. "I don't know who the f--- you think you're talking to, but it is not me. I am not the one."

She explains: "I don't seek [confrontation], I try to be respectful, but I say what needs to be said. And I have a very colorful way of saying it. I'm a really secure person and that's why I can be the way that I am. I'm not going to quiet myself to fit in somebody's box so that they like me."

There is a reason she keeps a hat handy in her barn that reads I'M NOT FOR EVERYONE.

Horse racing is a tough business. The racetrack is a hard place. The day-to-day work is not glamorous, the hours are brutal and success rates are like batting averages—far more races are lost than won. Competition to land the best horses and jockeys can be cutthroat. After growing up in a harness racing family, going to college to study pre-med and then pivoting back to the track, navigating what she calls a "wild child" phase and launching her own stable eight years ago, the 44-year-old DeVaux has proven both gifted and strong enough to fight her way to the top.

COURTESY OF CHERIE DEVAUX (3)

Was her ascent easy to see coming? In glimpses, definitely. The determination to succeed at every endeavor was there from an early age. DeVaux has long been type A orderly—her desk features a couple of very new framed photographs from the Derby triumph, but also notepads with small, neat handwriting in black ink. Barn workers know they need to be on top of their business or they will hear it from the boss. (Even Adrianne weathered some tense times working for Cherie).

You could say she was born to make history. But the entire, rose-garland picture didn't crystallize until a couple of years ago.

When Butch and Janet DeVaux were wed, they already had five children between them from previous marriages. Cherie was the first of five more they had

WINNING WAYS

From an early age, DeVaux was determined to succeed in whatever she tried, from barrel racing to bodybuilding to training champions.

but doesn't miss the deprivation that came with chasing perfect lean muscle mass. The weeks of ingesting no more than 1,000 calories a day—egg whites, broccoli, sweet potatoes, canned tuna—were not enjoyable.

"I love that you could look at a muscle and be like, *I built that*," she says. "But at times I was eating less than jockeys. That whole thing was really not mentally healthy for me because of body dysmorphia. I'd have a little pooch on me and be like, *Oh my God, that's so fat*. So now I'm a normal-size person who's healthy. It's still a work in progress. Everything is a work in progress."

Janet DeVaux was not a fan of the bodybuilding period in Cherie's life. "We'd eat a whole meal and she would have an olive," she says.

Then there was the Party Era, in which Cherie acknowledges she made plenty of youthful mistakes. She had left college at SUNY Albany to become an exercise rider, and at the time the racetrack life was fast, furious and shortsighted.

"I was always so serious about things, and that was my first time I didn't have any sense of direction," she says. "I would work at the barn in the morning, I'd come back in the afternoon [for the races],

> *"I'm a really secure person and that's why I can be the way that I am," DeVaux says. "I'm* **NOT GOING TO QUIET MYSELF** *to fit in."*

together, creating what they refer to as a *Brady Bunch* blended family. Butch was a harness racing trainer and sulky driver working in the shadow of the thoroughbred industry in Sarasota Springs, N.Y., and the kids grew up as part of the family business.

"Good help is hard to find," jokes Adrianne, "so they just made more help."

Cherie was at home on horseback, competing in barrel racing and later working as a thoroughbred exercise rider. She also played volleyball and softball when the family moved to Englewood, Fla., earning a "Will to Win" award at Lemon Bay High. Always looking for another challenge, she later became enthralled with competitive bodybuilding.

Cherie enjoyed the discipline it took to sculpt her body. She says she still likes to lift to "blow off steam," I'd take a long nap and then I would go out from sundown to sunup, basically. I was zero-to-60, but I'd always come to work the next morning. Thank God there were no cameras or Facebook.

"Now, on the flip side, I can say I never want to do that again. I'm not having a midlife crisis anytime soon."

A riding accident and some firm advice from a mentor put DeVaux on her career path. She was galloping a horse named Hot Canary one morning in Florida when something spooked the animal.

"The horse stopped and I didn't," says DeVaux, who flew over Hot Canary's head and fractured the plateau of her tibia upon impact with the ground. (A full knee replacement would come years later.)

Depressed, DeVaux went home to New York to convalesce. The trainer she was working for, Chuck Simon, used the injury as a reason to promote her to assistant trainer, accomplishing two things at once—curtailing her partying and putting her abundant insight into horses to greater use.

Janet remembers what the racing steward said when he handed Cherie her training license: "I think I'm giving this to the first woman to win the Kentucky Derby."

THE PROPHECY came true, but it took a while. DeVaux went out on her own in 2018 and promptly lost her first 29 races across nearly 11 months. Her husband, bloodstock agent David Ingordo, counseled patience. "Give it three years," he said. She never stopped believing herself.

"I'm one of those thick-minded people that thinks it's always going to work out," DeVaux says.

Finally, a horse named Traveling took DeVaux to the winner's circle at Gulfstream Park in a $39,000 maiden claiming race in March 2019. It was another four months until her second victory, but thereafter the wins started to come more frequently. By 2021 she topped the $2 million annual mark in earnings, and in '24 she had more than $10 million. During that breakout year, More Than Looks won the Breeders' Cup mile. Deep-pocketed owners took notice.

Among them: Daisy Phipps Pulito, owner and racing manager for Phipps Stable, a generations-deep blueblood operation. "I have been watching the way she trains," Phipps Pulito said after the Derby. "She's in Kentucky. I live in Kentucky. And I love the way she develops a horse."

One of horses Phipps sent to DeVaux was Golden Tempo. He was not the flashiest 2-year-old in her barn in 2025—that was Englishman, who won his first two starts in dazzling fashion to stamp himself as a Derby contender before being sidetracked with a minor injury. (Englishman returned to racing on Derby Day, finishing second in a high-powered Pat Day Mile, and should be a factor in other major races this year.)

COMING UP ROSES

Her horse's epic finish prompted an equally epic reaction from DeVaux, after which she and Ortiz shared their Golden moment.

"It's rare that a plan works out without any hiccups," says DeVaux. "And it ***EFFING WORKED OUT*** *amazingly."*

Golden Tempo came along more gradually, not racing until last December. But DeVaux was high on him, plotting a potential Derby path that went through Fair Grounds Race Course in New Orleans. When the horse won his first two starts there, including a stakes race in mid-January, DeVaux believed she simply needed to earn enough qualifying points for the Derby without pushing the horse too hard.

After third-place finishes in the Risen Star Stakes and the Louisiana Derby, the Golden Tempo bandwagon emptied out. But DeVaux was undeterred, relying on what she says is her greatest gift—being keenly attuned to her horses, reading their moods and reactions, studying details and trusting her gut instinct. She once surmised that one of her star horses, She Feels Pretty, would benefit from a calming influence at the barn. She brought in a goat and saw immediate benefits. (DeVaux is not the first trainer to employ a goat for those purposes with racehorses, but it's not exactly commonplace.)

With Golden Tempo, the plan was to avoid squeezing too much out of him, too soon. Losses in February and March were tolerable when everything was a buildup toward the first Saturday in May. "We wanted him to keep improving and get experience, but the

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

conversation after every race was, *Did we achieve what we hoped to?*" DeVaux says. "The answer was yes. Then we would take our big swing in the Derby."

At Cherie's request, 15 family members rented a sprinter van and made the drive from New York to Kentucky for the Derby. They stayed at her house in Lexington while she was in Louisville, keeping close to Golden Tempo and her other horses running at Churchill Downs that weekend. Derby Day is an interminable wait, leaving a trainer simmering in a stew of nerves, so Cherie's best friend, Alysse Jacobs, helped kill time by singing karaoke outside the barn. Cherie sang along, sitting in a camp chair with her feet up and seeming far less anxious than she assuredly was.

PAT MCDONOGH/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

Everyone in the DeVaux camp knew how the race would need to unfold for Golden Tempo to have a chance. Not blessed with tactical speed—"He's lazy," his jockey says—the slow-starting colt would be running late in the 1¼-mile Derby. He needed some help up front in the form of a stout pace and got it.

The fractions through the first half of the race were not suicidal, but they were fast enough to cook those on the front end. Meanwhile, after Ortiz guided his mount to the rail to save ground, Golden Tempo dawdled so far behind that he was at times not even in the NBC broadcast picture.

"I was afraid there was something wrong with him," says Janet. "I knew he would be behind, but he was *so* far behind."

Japan-based Danon Bourbon led by two lengths at the top of the stretch but gave way—first to 70–1 long shot Ocelli, and then to Renegade, who came surging in the middle of the track. But Ortiz had been tracking his brother from the far turn into the stretch, urging Golden Tempo along in Renegade's path. When Irad came inward as he briefly dueled with a fading Incredibolt, it provided an opening for Golden Tempo to surge ever wider and swoop past.

With just five strides left before the wire, Golden Tempo finally stuck his head in front. The colt led for little more than the final two seconds of the race. "Timed it right," Jose said with a smile after the race.

As the impact of the accomplishment landed on DeVaux's shoulders and nearly took her to the ground, so did the weight of history. For her entire career, she'd resisted being labeled a "female trainer" and answering questions about the rarity of her place in a male-dominated sport. But when girls began asking for her picture outside her barn during Derby week, she gained a greater appreciation for a role she never asked to have.

"The thing that really has become apparent to me is that not everyone has the same constitution as I have mentally," DeVaux says. "It really is an honor to be able to be that person for other women or little girls to look up to. You can dream big, and you can pivot. You can come from one place and make yourself a part of history."

After achieving that history, DeVaux had to make another big decision: bypassing the Preakness and forfeiting a shot at the Triple Crown. That's been an easier call to make in recent years, as horses have become progressively less accustomed to racing twice in a span of two weeks. Once that decision was out of the way, she was free to go back to training the rest of her stable—or as free as the public would allow her to be. DeVaux was seemingly everywhere and graciously granting every photo request, but she still had a business to run.

On that Friday after the Derby, she put a whopping 36 horses through timed workouts at Keeneland, polishing their conditioning in advance of a variety of races. Getting some space from well-wishers on that busy morning brought out the "Not for Everyone" in Cherie DeVaux.

"I need things to quiet down so I can pay attention and focus," she says. "So I just had to get everyone to shut the f--- up." □

PATRIOT

GAMES

Pitching the bar. Nine-pin bowling. Toss-up. Pitch & hustle. **SPORTS IN 1776** were an odd collection of endeavors, but thanks in no small part to a Founding Father with junk in his trunk, their influence can be found in what we play today

★★★★

by **STEVE RUSHIN**
illustrations by
JON STICH

GEORGE WASHINGTON HAD A BIG DUMPER.

"His heroic figure was only somewhat disfigured by a huge rump," in the words of the novelist Gore Vidal, who saw in the Founding Father an athlete who even sat like an All-Star catcher, easing himself onto a clubhouse recliner. "Slowly, carefully, painfully," Vidal wrote in his 1973 historical novel *Burr*, "Washington arranged himself in a throne-like chair, favouring one huge buttock."

Like Mariners catcher Cal "Big Dumper" Raleigh, Washington was blessed with an "oddly shaped body [that] made him the bane of his tailors," as his Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Ron Chernow put it. To avoid a pain in the rear, Washington became one to the men who supplied him with trousers. "These breeches must be roomy in the seat," he wrote to one tailor.

That rear end was the seat of his power. To understand what athletic competition was like 250 years ago, in 1776, you might start by examining George Washington's backside, as many historians have done. Like the best catchers and power pitchers, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army leveraged his lower body to fire the muzzle-loading cannon of his right arm.

Charles Willson Peale, the artist and Revolutionary War veteran, knew Washington's physique better than most. His 1779 oil portrait of the general sold at auction for $21.3 million in 2006. It was Peale who recalled a day at Washington's estate in 1773 when the great man excelled at a sport combining javelin and shot put.

"One afternoon several young gentlemen, visitors at Mount Vernon, and myself were engaged in pitching the bar, one of the athletic sports common in those days, when suddenly [Washington] appeared among us," Peale recounted. "He requested to be shown the pegs that marked the bounds of our efforts; then, smiling, and without putting off his coat, held out his hand for the missile. No sooner ... did the heavy iron bar feel the grasp of his mighty hand than it lost the power of gravitation, and whizzed through the air, striking the ground far, very far, beyond our utmost limits. We were indeed amazed, as

we stood around, all stripped to the buff, with shirt sleeves rolled up, and having thought ourselves very clever fellows."

New record set, Washington took his leave, but not before gently needling his vanquished competitors. "When you beat my pitch, young gentlemen," he said, "I'll try again."

Washington was 6' 2" and loathe to talk trash to his fellow men, who were half a foot shorter than he on average. Among Washington's earliest known handwriting samples was a widely circulated list, "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior," that he hand-copied as a teenager. These included the timeless precept: "Bedew no man's face with your Spittle by approaching too near him when you Speak."

His own athletic prowess spoke for itself. If Washington's feats would be embellished and mythologized by others in the ensuing decades, that would only give him more in common with modern athletes who defy "the power of gravitation." Washington didn't *really* throw a silver dollar across the Potomac, not least because the river is a mile wide at Mount Vernon and silver dollars weren't minted until 1794, when he was 62 years old. But he did throw a piece of slate across the Rappahannock River in Virginia, according to his stepgrandson, George Washington Parke Custis.

That story was so often met with skepticism that in 1936, nine years after retiring from a career that saw him win 417 games for the Washington Senators, 48-year-old Walter Johnson was roped into replicating the Rappahannock throw with a silver dollar near Washington's boyhood home in Fredericksburg, Va. The distance was measured as 372 feet. Johnson trained at home in Germantown, Md., by throwing a silver dollar against his barn door. Before the big day, the Big Train sent an ominous message through the press: "Arm getting stronger, barn door weaker."

On Feb. 22, the 204th anniversary of Washington's birth, Johnson cleared the river on the last two of his three attempts. In doing so, he bridged not just the Rappahannock but also two eras of American history, both of which valued a big arm.

RUMP BALL
The sporting implements in Washington's time included footballs, cricket bats, bowling pins and boxing "mufflers."

BEFORE THE American revolution, the colonies were largely beholden to English sports. Golf had literally been exported to the new continent. In 1743, a Charleston businessman named David Deas received a shipment of 96 clubs and 432 balls from Scotland. That same year, in England, Jack Broughton—who popularized the use of "mufflers," or gloves—established a few boundaries in the savage sport of boxing, such as making it illegal to "seize" an opponent by "the breeches."

But no athletic skill was more prized, or of greater use, than "horsemanship." On foot, Washington cut a strange figure. Gore Vidal, still cooking: "For a large, rather ungainly man (he had the hips, buttocks and bosom of a woman), Washington could move with brutal swiftness." But astride one of his warhorses—a half-Arabian named Blueskin; a chestnut gelding called Nelson—he was an equestrian statue come to life.

"He possessed strong but narrow shoulders and wide, flaring hips with muscular thighs that made him a superb horseman," notes Chernow. Thomas Jefferson, in an 1814 letter, called Washington "the best horseman of his age, and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback."

This is high praise from Jefferson, who didn't believe that sports built good character or even good health. "Games played with the ball and others of that nature, are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind," Jefferson wrote in 1785, the same year that a racehorse named Magnolia was described in a Virginia newspaper as "thought by all who have seen him to be perfect." That Arabian stallion was owned by Washington, who liked to gamble on the ponies.

He also hunted foxes. Sweet Lips, Washington's beloved foxhound, was a kind of emotional support

dog, accompanying Washington to the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774. There, delegates drafted the 14 Articles of Association, the eighth of which resolved that colonists bracing for war with England should forsake their many recreational pastimes: "We will…discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of games, cock-fighting, exhibitions of shews [sic], plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments."

Washington so enjoyed horse racing that he called himself a "consistent and persistent loser" at the Maryland Jockey Club races in 1762, though he won money back at the card table. Washington's card game of choice was whist. It was not lost on him that in whist, the king could be beaten by an ace.

AS THE Revolutionary War began, it became clear that banning sports and gambling was not just a bad idea but a futile one. Like the future country's future obsession—American football—the war occasioned hours of downtime. Many of the soldiers filled those hours with the idle competi-

"Pitch & hustle" was a variation on the game **MICHAEL JORDAN** *was still playing for money in the United Center more than 200 years later.*

tions of young men. On Aug. 22, 1777, Abigail Adams, the future First Lady, wrote to her husband, John, a Massachusetts delegate to the Continental Congress: "This continent has paid thousands to officers and men who have been loitering about playing foot-ball and nine-pins, and doing their own private business whilst they ought to have been defending our forts and we are now suffering for the neglect."

Foot-ball and nine-pins weren't the only athletic diversions for soldiers. Swimming offered the dual benefit of exercise and hygiene. Even so, Washington in his General Orders of Aug. 22, 1775, had to put an end to soldiers parading about in the altogether. "The General does not mean to discourage the practice of bathing, whilst the weather is warm enough to continue it," Washington decreed, "but he expressly forbids, any persons doing it, at or near the Bridge in Cambridge, where it has been observed and complained of, that many Men, lost to all sense of decency and common modesty, are running about naked upon the Bridge, whilst Passengers, and even Ladies of the first fashion in the neighbourhood, are passing over it, as if they meant to glory in their shame."

Even more debauched were the foot-ball and nine-pins that Abigail Adams abhorred. Foot-ball in the 1770s was violent, gambled on, played for prize money and contested over vast spaces. Goals could be any physical landmarks, spread as much as three miles apart, and matches between villages or teams might last for four hours. The ball, or pig's bladder, could be kicked, thrown, carried or conveyed across these acreages by just about any means.

Writing for the British Newspaper Archive, Rose Stavely-Wadham turned up a November 1771 account in the *Derby Mercury* between two villages in Yorkshire, England, with the winning team getting 40 guineas: "After they had played for a full two Hours, in which Time there were a great many smart falls and ill Bruises given on both Sides, the Gentlemen of Sharlston got the first Goal. On beginning a second Time, two of the Gentlemen of opposite Parties met together at the Ball with such violence, that one of them had his Leg broke, and the other his Shoulder dislocated." When a throng bum-rushed the competitors, the match was abruptly abandoned. "There was some damage sustained by the rudeness of the Mob," noted the *Mercury* correspondent. "A fine Boy, about Eight Years of Age, was thrown down among them, and unfortunately trod to Death."

The English brought foot-ball (or football) across the Atlantic. In a diary entry of Nov. 8, 1775, a 20-year-old Connecticut teacher and militia member wrote of a typical day during the Revolutionary War: "Cleaned my gun—pl[aye]d some football." Has a more American sentence fragment ever been written? Less than a year later, that young man, Nathan Hale, would be hanged as a spy by the British army after saying: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

It's not strictly true to say that the Revolutionary War was fought over how best to convey a ball toward a goal: using only one's feet and head or by carrying and throwing the ball? Should that ball be perfectly round or an oblate spheroid? And what is the optimal part of the pig to be repurposed for recreational use: pig's bladder or pigskin? Football or American football?

AMERICA WOULD have no kings but DraftKings. Then as now, people enjoyed gambling on anything that moved. On Oct. 3, 1775, six months after the Shot Heard 'Round the World was fired at Concord, George Washington issued an order: "Any Officer, non Commission'd Officer, or Soldier, who shall hereafter be detected playing at Toss-up, pitch & hustle, or any other Games of chance, in, or near the Camp or Villages bordering on the encampments, shall without delay be confined and punished for disobedience of orders ... The General does not mean by the above Order, to discourage sports of exercise and recreation, he only means to discountenance and punish Gaming."

"Toss-up" was gambling on the outcome of a coin flip. The Super Bowl coin flip remains the most popular prop bet in the most bet-upon game in American sports. "Pitch & hustle" was a variation on pitching pennies, the game Michael Jordan was still playing for money in the bowels of the United Center in Chicago more than 200 years later.

No sport was more popular in the burgeoning nation than bowling. Lawn bowling was for the upper classes. The bowling green in lower Manhattan, which exists to this day as Bowling Green, featured a statue of King George III that was knocked from its plinth on July 9, 1776, and possibly melted down for ammunition used by Continental army soldiers.

Nine-pins was for the masses, and like every other sport served as a locus of gambling and drinking. *Rip Van Winkle* is the story of a henpecked husband living in New York State before the Revolutionary War. He helps carry a keg to a spot in the Catskills where men are playing nine-pins. What follows is a masculine idyll out of *The Honeymooners*. Beer, bowling and a break from the missus: Rip gets hammered and falls asleep for 20 years.

When he wakes, Rip notices the flag fluttering in front of the Union Hotel bears "a singular assemblage of stars and stripes—all this was strange and incomprehensible." The portrait of King George III on the hotel sign "was singularly metamorphosed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a sceptre, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, GENERAL WASHINGTON."

Washington Irving was born in 1783 and named for the general who would step down as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army at the end of that year and "retire" to Mount Vernon. In Rip Van Winkle, Irving created a man joyously reborn into a new nation of infinite possibility. Rip was suddenly a free man, liberated less from an oppressive monarchy than from his own wife, who had died during his slumber: "He had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony," writes Irving, "and could go in and out whenever he pleased, without dreading the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle."

The final lines of *Rip Van Winkle* are a testament to the retrograde consolations of boozing, snoozing and bros-being-bros on Bowling Night: "Even to this day they never hear a thunder-storm of a summer afternoon about the Kaatskill, but they say Hendrick Hudson and his crew are at their game of nine-pins; and it is a common wish of all henpecked husbands in the neighbourhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon."

Nine-pin bowling was such a dissolute pastime—province of drinkers, gamblers and other deadbeats—that the Connecticut state legislature would pass a law banning nine-pin alleys outright in 1841. Resourceful tavern owners skirted the law by adding a 10th pin which, as legend has it, gave rise to the modern game of bowling. Charles Dickens, on a visit to New York in 1842, described "a painted lamp [that] directs you to the Bowling Saloon, or Ten-Pin alley; Ten-Pins being a game of mingled chance and skill, invented when the legislature passed an act forbidding Nine-Pins."

Still, Washington Irving's most enduring contribution to American life lay not in nine-pins, or Rip Van Winkle, or the legendary New York City music venue Irving Plaza on Irving Place. Rather, it's in another of his characters, Diedrich Knickerbocker, a fictional Dutchman who wrote a history of New York.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

What follows for Rip Van Winkle is a masculine idyll out of The Honeymooners.

BEER, BOWLING AND A BREAK FROM THE MISSUS.

Because of him, "Knickerbocker" became a nickname for any Manhattanite, and for the kind of pants favored by golfers, and for a New York baseball club founded in 1845 by Alexander Cartwright. In 1946, when a former New York sportswriter named Ned Irish founded a professional basketball team in the city, he and his staff naturally called them the New York Knickerbockers, or Knicks.

New York is also where George Washington, summoned out of retirement, was inaugurated as the new nation's first president in 1789. The capital city on the Potomac would be established a year later and named for America's first chief executive. But what to call that executive? Not *president*, surely. John Adams thought the term was not worthy of the high office. After all, he argued, "there are presidents of fire companies and cricket clubs."

Sports were never far from the minds of the Founding Fathers. The Laws of Cricket were drafted in England in 1744. Ten years later, Benjamin Franklin brought a copy of them from London to the new continent, where sports would forever after flourish and athletes would be revered. And yet, "no public figure would ever reach the same historic heights" of iconography as Washington, in the words of biographer Joseph Ellis, who notes that long before our modern superstars did it, the first president adopted the affectation of the elite athlete: "He began to refer to himself in the third person."

As Washington grew old and got rheumatism, his letters, Ellis notes, took on "the poignant tone of a once-great athlete past his prime." He reminisced about glory days with old teammates, writing to his fellow revolutionary the Marquis de Lafayette: "I called to mind the days of my youth, and found they had long since fled to return no more; that I was now descending the hill, I had 52 years been climbing."

Washington died on Dec. 14, 1799, after which the revolutionary war officer Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee famously eulogized him as "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." A century later, sportswriter Charley Dryden would just as famously repurpose the phrase, calling the baseball Senators, in the city named for Washington: "First in war, first in peace, and last in the American League."

In sports, as in life, Washington's name and image still echo everywhere: in the Washington Commanders, in the bridge that conveys cars to Yankee Stadium, and in the mascot races at Washington Nationals games, where mascot George Washington and mascot Thomas Jefferson compete against each other in the middle of the fourth inning 81 dates a year. How wonderful that Jefferson, who disdained "games played with the ball," lives on as an effigy with an oversized head that wobbles as he sprints for a beer-buzzed mob at the ballpark.

For that mob, and all sports fans, the Revolutionary War still resounds. It's in the tricorn hat of the New England football mascot Pat Patriot. It's in the endless crawl of team names on the ticker: Revolution, Liberty, 76ers. *Yankee* was a pejorative term for colonists, who reclaimed the name and wore it with pride.

Listen closely and you'll hear their voices still, echoing ever so faintly, anytime the Yankees take on the Royals, or the 76ers face down the Kings. □

THE
TURNING
UP

HEAT

He's a 17-year-old *Minecraft*-loving Knucklehead (his term), but **STRIKER PENCE** can effortlessly throw 100 mph. How much faster can the kid with baseball in his blood bring it?

by **GREG BISHOP**

photographs by **ERICK W. RASCO**

THE BASEBALL UNICORN LIVES IN CORONA, CALIFORNIA.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

The aptly-named Striker has scouts marveling at his arm, but he dreams more of hitting walk-off bombs.

His house sits at the end of a cul-de-sac, one among thousands forming the Inland Empire's ocean of suburbia. The Big Bus is parked out front, gassed up for another tournament. The fruit—bananas, loquats, Granny Smith and golden apples, peaches, apricots, figs, guava and mulberries—grows out back.

This is home to the Pence family: two parents, five children (ages 10 to 18), three dogs and one unicorn. He sleeps upstairs, hogs the cereal, quotes *Napoleon Dynamite* and prefers his chocolate milk by the barrel.

On a random Tuesday in mid-April, the 90-inch television is paused on *90 Day Fiancé*. The house fills. The hubbub amplifies. Spring means baseball games and water polo practices and doctor visits and school days and *No, you can't go to Coachella* ...vroom-vroom-vroom.

On this day, as on most days, everyone spills outside. Years ago, Allison Pence surprised her husband, Howie, a retired professional pitcher, with a backyard baseball wonderland. He had taken their oldest son, Striker, to a tournament. She had the batting cage constructed in their absence. With these boys—and their friends—Howie is *already* on his fifth net.

He guesses that the creaky pitching machine delivers its hardest throws at 95 mph. Striker can handle those. He's an ace pitcher and slugger. Still a sophomore. Turned 17 on March 23. And he *already* throws harder than that machine.

Meet Striker Pence, the unicorn.

Hurlers envy his name, not to mention his arm. Striker clocked 92 mph at age 14. After another birthday, he hit 97—in his first high school appearance. At 16, he registered 100 mph on eight straight pitches and triple digits 10 times in that one inning. And, last October, Striker joined the 101-mph club.

He is, his father says, "still learning how to pitch."

These throws went viral, each spreading wider, farther, lighting social media ablaze. This morphed the kid into a real-life Sidd Finch. The secret cannot be kept much longer.

That Striker throws harder than just about any 17-year-old, ever. That's not his secret.

This is: Throwing hard is part of the job description. Throwing *harder* has never been the point.

BEFORE THE PENCES raised pro ballplayers, they didn't follow the sport at all. Striker's grandfather grew up in southern Minnesota, performing odd jobs on nearby farms. Howie Pence would move to Texas, join the cattle industry and create his distinct brand of livestock. He met his second wife, Gail, there. Each had a daughter from a previous marriage, and Gail soon gave birth again. Another girl in a house full of women.

Two boys, Howie Jr. and Hunter, changed their family's dynamic. A neighbor asked one question: *Did they want to try this sport he loved called baseball?* Soon the HP brothers decided on the only plan either ever had. Their father started watching every Rangers game. He chauffeured the boys to private coaching, elite teams and tournaments. Howie played third base or right field. Hunter always said Howie hit better early on. But coaches sized up the hard thrower and decided that how well Howie slugged no longer mattered. "Been that way forever," he says.

Howie earned his coaches' respect with availability as much as ability. But no one counted pitches. Sometimes, Howie appeared three times, in different games, in one day. In college, at Sam Houston State, he tore his right UCL, forcing Tommy John surgery. One doctor told Howie that his elbow was already 90% scar tissue. He'd likely torn it years earlier.

Howie spent 2003 to '06 in the Padres' organization but never advanced beyond High A. He bounced around the minors and independent ball, the team names as striking as those of his future children. Fort Wayne Wizards! Lake Elsinore Storm! Winnipeg Goldeyes!

The scar snakes across Howie's right elbow, presenting painful, daily proof of the exact calculus he wants Striker to avoid—pitching too much, throwing too hard, too often. "They didn't know better then," Howie says. "It was reckless. Reckless."

Howie says this as he, Striker and Striker's agent, Matt Hannaford, drive to a recovery session with the Padres' former longtime trainer, Paul Navarro. Howie pauses, face pointed out the window for 15 seconds, then resumes. "I'm happy how my life turned out," he says.

"Sure, everything happens for a reason," Howie continues. "I'll probably"—he gestures at Striker in the seat behind him—"save this guy from getting hurt."

THE BASEBALL lab basks in South Florida sunshine, anonymity intact. No address. No signs. It does have branding. But its branding is ... no branding. Some of baseball's best players decamp there every offseason; some 30 pitchers, lifting weights, fortifying arms, increasing pliability, testing out new ideas, assessing their sleep positions, diagnosing allergies, exploring cognitive issues and tweaking their routines in advance of another season. "It's a secret society of pitchers lab," founder Derek Groomer says. "We're not trying to blow up."

Groomer's path to non-villainous keeper of a baseball lair began in medical school—until he decided to play pro tennis. Then the Mets hired him to create a sports science department in 2019. The last one stuck. Groomer would bolster similar departments for the baseball programs at Georgia and LSU. In '23, the Tigers won a College World Series title behind Paul Skenes, now the reigning NL Cy Young winner and Pirates ace. The lab is their creation, and it owes to trust (between them), health (Skenes) and biometric expertise (Groomer).

Striker joined their secret society last fall. He threw from atop a NewtForce mound, which analyzed his ground force in 3-D. TrackMan measured velocity, spin rate, ball movement and release metrics. "He's super, super raw," Groomer says.

That's expected but also in contrast with another assessment of Striker's mechanics overall. "Super-efficient and super-safe," Groomer says. Striker exhibited MLB-level force outputs and timing without the harmful movements typical in young aces. "I don't know how you got it right at this age," Groomer told Striker. "But you've organized your body to throw *hard*."

Asked how rare that is, Groomer pauses briefly, then says, "I haven't seen it before."

He trains professionals with "four or five years" of experience who are just reaching the same level of mechanical efficiency. "We've worked on this for three years with one guy," he told Striker. "And you're doing [the same thing] naturally. And you don't even realize it's natural!"

Striker is cut from the classic max-intent pitcher cloth. The aim is to throw as hard as possible, with a fully developed body and refined mechanics. Dialing back can mean loss of command. This does not, however, mean that Striker cannot develop craftiness and technique at the same time.

For now, comparisons center on hurlers like San Diego's Mason Miller (max velocity 104.2 mph) and Boston's Aroldis Chapman (max velocity 105.8 mph, the highest speed ever recorded). And yet ... speak with baseball's developers, evaluators steeped in the modern pitching landscape. They've never seen an arm at 15 or 16 or 17 like Striker's. What's possible is staggering. Striker throws that hard without trying to throw that hard. Asked if he could one day surpass Chapman's mark, Groomer doesn't say yes. But he doesn't say no, either.

"I would very comfortably say [it's possible]," he says.

COURTESY OF THE PENCE FAMILY

THE FIRST TIME Howie asked out Allison, she pretended she didn't speak English. He played for Lake Elsinore, and she had no interest in dating a baseball player.

This is where Tom Anderson enters the unicorn's origin story. If you're old enough, you remember: Tom from Myspace. Howie found Allison there. She soon made his top eight. And when Hunter, who would go

ROBERT BECK (HUNTER PENCE)

GIANT LEAP

Striker has spent plenty of time around big leaguers, including his uncle Hunter (below) and his self-professed No. 1 fan, Bumgarner (opposite).

on to win two World Series with the Giants, switched agents to the Beverly Hills Sports Council in 2007, he flew Howie to Los Angeles for the signing—but only so Howie could ferry Allison on their first date. Nine months later they were married.

Before the birth of their first son, he sometimes teased her. "If he's not a first-rounder, you only have yourself to blame."

There wasn't much time for teasing then. The three oldest siblings—the Big 3, in Pence parlance—were all born in a 22-month span.

They desired a large family, ended up with five kids and absolutely crushed the names. Dad wanted their oldest to share his initials. Hence HayleyJane, who will play water polo at powerhouse Fresno State next year. Striker came from Mom—she loved the way it sounded—as did Ace, inspired by Jim Carrey, followed by Maverick and Paisleykaye. Striker stands 6' 6" and weighs 210 pounds; Ace, 16, is 6' 5", 230; Maverick turned 14 on May 9, and he's already 6-foot, 144. Grocery bills average around $8,000 per month.

Howie and Hunter grew up with baseball on the brain, their shared goal singular. Howie wished for two boys close in age who could play together, like he and Hunter did. They didn't have to choose baseball. Didn't have to choose sports. The Pence children write down their preferred ambitions. Striker has consistently scribbled the same thing: *Make the Baseball Hall of Fame*.

Regardless of team, age or skill level, Striker always drew attention. That was Hunter Pence's nephew on the diamond. Striker loved baseball for every reason except fame. He loved afternoons spent on fields at major league parks. Or his bond with Madison Bumgarner, the three-time World Series champion. There's a poster hanging in Striker's bedroom, inscribed by Bumgarner, who describes himself, a four-time All-Star and World Series MVP, as Striker's "No. 1 fan."

Even in grade school, Striker devoured baseball history. One inspiration, in all seriousness: Charles "Old Hoss" Radbourn. In 1883, Old Hoss started 68 of his team's 98 games. The next year, he won 59 times in a single season, including victories in 18 straight starts (or 19, or 20, depending on the source).

Howie wasn't surprised when his boys arrived at the exact same place, ambition, sport. But he also noticed an important difference. His boys don't realize how hard it is to make The Show. Their family is 2-for-2 in its attempts to play professionally. The kids think they'll go 5-for-5.

When Striker flashed prowess, Howie made a promise. "We don't want him blowing out on our watch." He spoke with coaches, helping set pitch count limits. He sought outside expertise. He didn't coax Striker into the backyard batting cage. He followed the boy inside. Striker, meanwhile, never stopped growing: an inch a month, it seemed like, and for years. And every time some anonymous know-it-all aims their keyboard right at him, surmising that Howie must

want Striker to achieve what he could not, he thinks about the boy who, when tasked with naming as many Hall of Famers as he could in 10 minutes, got 80% right.

The point, always, per Howie: "Keeping it fun."

THE BIG BUS isn't a bus at all. It's a Chevy Explorer conversion van, complete with Wi-Fi, a flatscreen, six bucket seats and a bench in back that folds down into a bed. The Big Bus has taken Pences to New York, Nebraska, Nevada and Texas, to the Louisville Slugger factory and spring training ballparks. Its odometer recently tipped over 70,000 miles, each traveled since they got it in 2020. And when Striker and his core friend group climb aboard, the Knuckleheads all stick to their assigned seats.

As far as pitching prospects go, Striker is one of one. At home, and in this friend group, he's one of five; a unicorn, in other words, who's still a teen. The Knuckleheads are Striker and his oldest friends, Thomas Padilla and Jonathan Thornton. They became the Core Four, along with Troy Randall, when Striker was 6 and the others were 7. They played 11 seasons together, adding a fifth member, Joshua Angulo, at age 12.

Striker was always different, and they knew that but didn't mind. Because he never set himself apart. Striker was them—always there for the faraway tournaments, backyard hacks, swing coaches, bats stacked on top of bats, AXE body spray bombs, movies, jokes, sleepovers, sparring sessions complete with boxing gloves, *Fortnite* marathons and something called Extreme Hide-and-Seek.

The best summer? Easy. Cooperstown. 12U. The Knuckleheads+ played 12 times. The fields were spread out, so they'd finish one game, then start jogging to the next. They played after the concession stands ran out of food, in front of empty bleachers, when plumbing issues shut down bathrooms. They played six games on the final day alone, losing only in the championship, after a brief pause during the semifinals for a fireworks extravaganza.

Five years later, Tommy says, "Best time in my whole life."

They're still together, playing baseball at Santiago High. Tommy transferred in last season. Striker refused to transfer out, despite close proximity to Corona High, which placed three players in the first round of the 2025 draft, an MLB first.

These friends know Striker like his siblings know Striker. He's trying to grow a mustache but cannot yet. He's, *ahem*, thrifty. Last big-money purchase: $50, on a box of Cadbury Eggs. He could go pro in hacky sack, if such a thing were viable. He tries to avoid reading, because he saw somewhere that Lenny Dykstra famously avoided books to protect his eyes. He argues with H.J. over whether water polo or baseball is more difficult. Loves *Minecraft*. Needs help with laundry. Struggles to tie shoes. "Dude can throw 100," Ace says, "but can't put something in the microwave."

In recent years, Striker has apprenticed under Groomer, Doug Latta (who enhanced Cal Raleigh's swing before a historic 2025), and Navarro, among others. Striker began working with Lotta at age 9. His first big league instructor was his uncle. Striker wants to bat in the majors, too; become an American Ohtani. Striker throws right-handed but bats from the left side. He kicks his front leg up, high, almost like a pitcher. Striker says he never dreams about fanning

> *"I don't know how you got it right at this age," Groomer told Striker. "But you've organized your body to throw hard." Asked how rare that is, Groomer says, "I haven't seen it before."*

hitters; only about hitting walk-off home runs. And he says these things, and he works with these people, and he oozes this talent, and he wants to pursue these accomplishments that are unfathomable to most. But celebrity is not what he's chasing.

Sometimes, he'll joke about the movie *Jerry Maguire*, where the presumed No. 1 draft pick, young quarterback Frank Cushman, says the suffocating attention gave him *Cushlash* over his own hype, warranted though it was. Striker experiences *Strikelash*. Same as those 16-year-old batters staring at the giant teenager who throws triple digits.

YOUNG PITCHERS often throw more often and as hard as possible and for too long. Same as they did when Howie whipped his own blazing fastballs. And, yes, the vast majority of top pitching prospects, if their careers go well and even if they don't, will damage the very arms that hold baseballs and livelihoods, simultaneously.

This means that Striker may require Tommy John surgery, like Howie did. This does not mean that Striker will require Tommy John.

Sometimes, well-meaning baseball types ask Howie if the family will elect to have that procedure early, as is fairly common now for young pitchers. Never, Howie says. "I wouldn't rush that on anybody, not my worst enemy. It's not something that you wish on a kid, like, take that [idea] out of your brain. Don't say that."

Striker's not chucking as hard as he possibly can. He's on a progression, and it's no different than most progressions for pitching prospects; he simply threw harder than everyone else earlier.

Groomer hammers the same emphases to Striker that he imprinted in Skenes. Focus on controllables. Do not stress the arm for no reason. Adjust based on genetics. Ground all decisions in science and performance data. Do scans that reveal factors like fat infiltration.

Even then, in Striker's case, some evaluating isn't possible, not yet. At 17, what Groomer calls "growth points" aren't in secure positions yet. Groomer suggests a simpler approach that aligns with how these Pences have raised their children. "Fall in love with the game and love the game every day," he says. "Things happen. You never really know. No matter what happens, Striker's in a great place."

COURTESY OF THE PENCE FAMILY

ALL IN THE FAMILY

The Pence clan offers support for Striker while keeping him in check. "Dude can throw 100 but can't put something in the microwave," says brother Ace.

The goal: Build a chain, through arm care, leg strength, making the physical body a priority—all while the body itself fills out.

To become an MLB ace, like Skenes, Striker must develop at least two pitches that are antithetical to his greatest gift. Neither can start with "fast." He needs a repeatable delivery. Needs a repertoire. Needs control. His greatest gift isn't velocity; it's time. Harder is, essentially, guaranteed.

In terms of future 108 mph fastballs, Howie scoffs. He'd prefer that Striker threw most pitches between 97 and 99 mph, albeit with pinpoint precision and variety. Add a cutter or a sinker. Tinker with grips. Learn a changeup. Master the sneaky split-fingered fastball that's already in development. "He's gonna have years to develop this stuff," Groomer says. "Honestly, he's good enough now to get guys out at the big league level. For him, 99 [mph] is less of a strain than it would be for 99 percent of pitchers."

At Perfect Game, the amateur baseball scouting service and tournament platform, Hunter is part of the ownership group. Striker takes part in what the organization calls "gateways," or tournament-style showcases with additional prospect development. Jered Goodwin, the organization's VP of scouting operations, says Striker does things on baseball fields that lifers "have never seen at his age."

Striker is not without options in this new paradigm. Many ask if he will "reclassify," or skip a grade. Most right-handed prospects, even elite ones, even those who throw baseballs faster than eyes can track, go to college. Such is the bounty of right-handed arms in the MLB. Like Skenes, who dominated with Groomer at LSU, spent one season in the minors and made his Pirates debut in 2024. Striker will decide after his sophomore season if he's going to reclassify.

His wider team gives Striker a head start on these processes, earlier in critical areas that project a healthier body—and arm—for his career. Groomer taught Striker the warmup routine Skenes uses before each of his starts. It involves a football, a stick and a bag filled with water.

He's building professional habits, and he's still a teenager, with a synthetic friend created on ChatGPT that he calls Bernard.

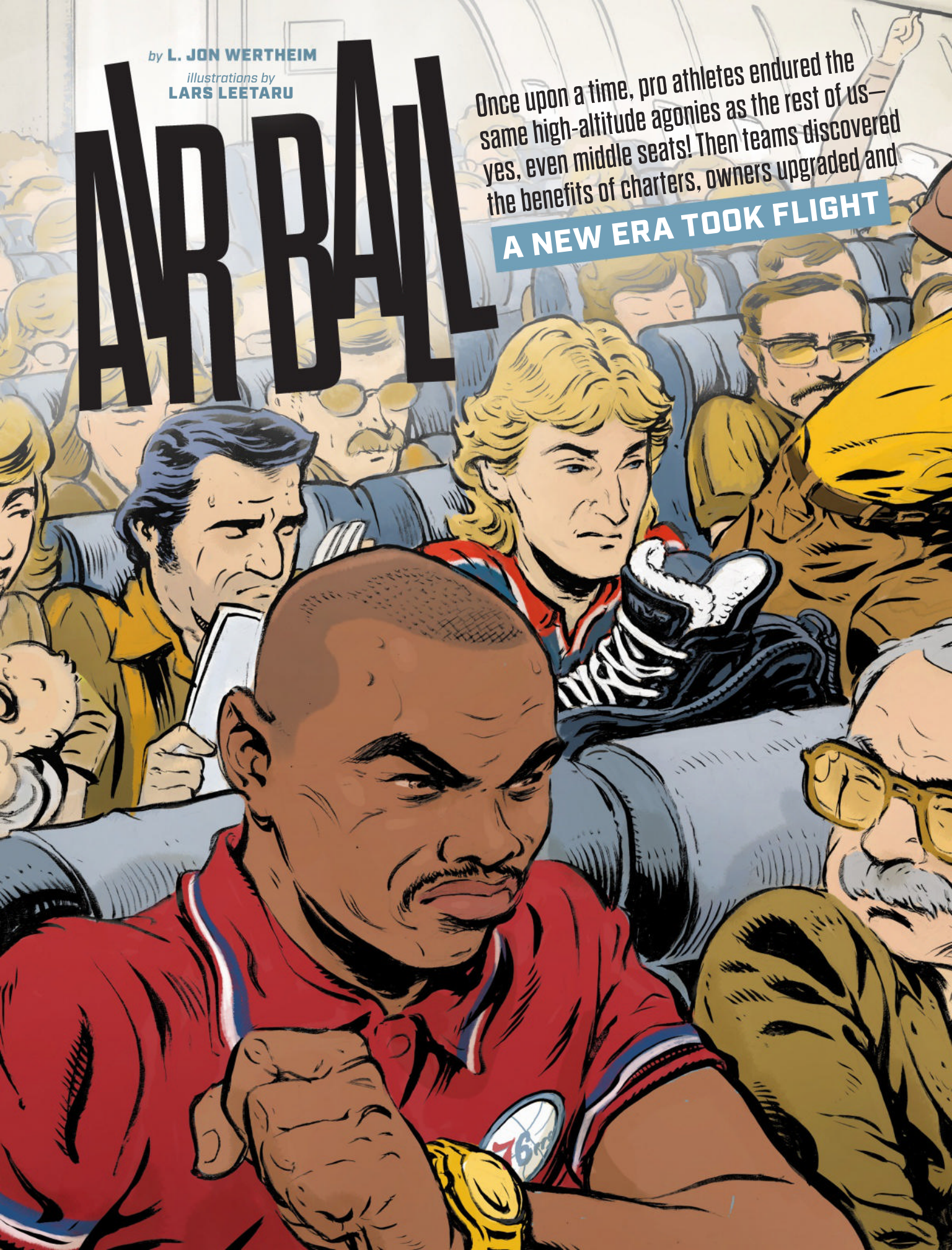
STRIKER PENCE makes far less of all this than everyone around him. He likes attending public school, where sometimes it feels like, "No one knows anything about me," he says. "Sometimes, I walk around school, and I'm like, *These guys don't even know!*"

He says his father did everything possible to support Striker's long-held, Old Hoss-inspired dream. That other coaches or teammates or strangers push him to hit triple digits. That he doesn't care if he throws harder ever again. That he once rode in Hunter Strickland's green Lamborghini but peppered the former Giant with pitching questions. That he believes Fred McGriff should be in the Hall of Fame.

Sometimes, Striker will scroll through his Instagram feed and watch videos of him, at 8 or 9, smacking pitches into Net 1 or Net 2. That's still him. He doesn't necessarily want to throw a baseball faster than any pitcher ever. If it happens, he says, "It'd be really cool."

He doesn't have a backup plan. He doesn't need one. He'd like to follow Howie's retirement blueprint—trading stocks by day and coaching youth baseball teams at night. "Yeah," Striker says, "Be a good dad."

His parenting model doesn't hear Striker say this. But an hour earlier, right around when Striker's grand slam and six RBIs powered the Santiago Knuckleheads to another victory, Howie looked out over that same ballpark and said, of his half-teen, half-pro, all-unicorn, "The best thing we ever did for Striker was just ... let him be." □


by L. JON WERTHEIM
illustrations by
LARS LEETARU
AIR BALL
Once upon a time, pro athletes endured the same high-altitude agonies as the rest of us—yes, even middle seats! Then teams discovered the benefits of charters, owners upgraded and
A NEW ERA TOOK FLIGHT

It was the spring of 1985,

back when Golden State's NBA team, Warriors in name only, was a meek collective that lost more games than it won and seldom made the playoffs. But on a Sunday night in March, the Dubs scored a rare win—one of only 22 that season—against the Los Angeles Clippers in this, their first season at the L.A. Sports Arena. After spending the night at the LAX Marriott, Golden State headed, groggily, to board an early morning Western Airlines flight for its next game, against the Utah Jazz in Salt Lake City.

Ted Robinson, then the team's radio and TV man, was part of the traveling party that, incredibly, only numbered 16—a dozen players, the head coach, one assistant coach, the trainer and the play-by-play guy. Once at the gate, Robinson trudged down the ramp and, upon boarding, made a right turn and headed to his customary seat in the second row of the economy section.

It had been league policy for years: NBA teams played road games, repaired to the hotel for a few hours of fitful sleep and then took the first flight out the next morning. Per the collective bargaining agreement, for flights longer than one hour teams were obligated to seat players in business class, if available. The premium cabin seats were given to the players not in order of status or contract size or height—woe to the seven-footer folded into coach. No, per NBA union rules, seats were meted out in order of seniority.

So it was, also that season, that the great Michael Jordan—already an ascending star with his own line of Nike shoes and a nickname, ironically, of Air—was a regular at O'Hare, going through security lines and whiling away delays, same as the insurance salesman from Skokie. Not only that, he sometimes flew coach.

Would you like peanuts or pretzels?. Charles Barkley, drafted in the same 1984 class as Jordan, recalls being O.K. when Moses Malone and Dr. J. flew in the front of the plane. But it enraged him "when some [veteran] who didn't even take his sweats off during the game" sat up front, while he wrestled a stranger for an armrest, as if contesting a rebound, in Row 29.

Anyway, by coincidence, the Warriors weren't the only pro team on that particular flight from LAX to Salt Lake. The Edmonton Oilers had played against the Los Angeles Kings the previous night at The Forum. Their road trip over, they were flying home, and as was usually the case, there was no direct flight to Alberta's second-largest city. With the Warriors players commandeering the first-class cabin, the entire Oilers team was consigned to steerage.

As Robinson took his seat, he heard a familiar voice from behind him, calling out, "Hey, Ted." It was Edmonton defenseman Don Jackson, who'd been Robinson's classmate at Notre Dame in the 1970s. As boarding continued, Robinson and Jackson chatted a bit and caught up. Jackson lamented that once in Salt Lake, the Oilers had to fly to Calgary and *then* to Edmonton.

And then Jackson said, "Hey, have you met Wayne?" Robinson was confused, but turned back to Row 32, to find a teammate of Jackson's, blond locks poking out from under a baseball cap, who was not only marooned in a middle seat but also would be there for three legs of the flight, a "two-stopper" in the vernacular.

"Ted," Jackson said. "Wayne Gretzky."

A few weeks later, the player hemmed into that coach seat—while a 22–60 NBA team consumed the first-class inventory—would win his *sixth* NHL MVP award.

WE NOW take it as an article of faith. Athletes in the major pro sports leagues don't fly commercial. They also don't wear football helmets made of tanned leather, call their own plays during competition or take second jobs in the offseason to supplement their incomes. If you see a pro athlete at an airport, odds are something has gone profoundly wrong. They've been traded. Sent home from a road trip. Cut, unceremoniously, from a roster.

Many college teams fly on charters. And not just in the revenue sports of basketball and football. (The Wake Forest tennis team flew for a stretch on a private jet. The reason: The PJ belonged to Sean Hannity, whose son was on the team.) Same for individual sport athletes, the top ones anyway, who thread the PGA Tour or get to their next tennis tournament on a plane identified by a tail number, not a flight number.

But this is a relatively new phenomenon. For the first half of the 20th century, teams took buses and trains and only occasionally planes. Some of this owed to the cost, these being the days before the sports industrial sector took off. Some of it owed to pragmatism. (Until the mid-1950s, the St. Louis Cardinals were the only baseball team west of the Mississippi, and that was only by a matter of a few miles.) Some of it owed to safety. Knute Rockne died in an aviation accident in 1931, and superstition only increased later when Roberto Clemente (1972) and Thurman Munson (1979) perished in plane crashes.

Through much of the second half of the 20th century, teams flew, but did so commercially, with boarding passes in hand, enduring delays and gate changes and holdups afterward at baggage claim. The 20th century was 90% over before athletes stopped going to airports and started going to airfields.

There were a few exceptions. Before decamping for L.A., the Minneapolis Lakers also flew private. Sort of. Writing in *The Defector*, Dave McKenna recently told the story of the remarkable frugality of Lakers owner Bob Short. To save on travel costs, Short purchased a DC-3 prop plane, reportedly a converted World War II–era cargo hauler. During the 1959–60 season, after the Lakers lost a road game to the St. Louis Hawks, the team flew home, only for the plane to suffer an electric system failure. Peering out of the cockpit, the pilot made the decision to execute an emergency landing in an Iowa cornfield. (McKenna notes: "Less than a year after Buddy Holly crashed into an Iowa cornfield during a blizzard trying to get to Minnesota, the Lakers crashed into an Iowa cornfield during a blizzard trying to get to Minnesota.")

Even the great Michael Jordan was a regular at O'Hare, going through security lines and whiling away delays, same as the insurance salesman from Skokie.

The Lakers, happily, survived. At the owner's behest, the plane was repaired at the site of the emergency landing, then flown home. When contacted for comment, Short, undeterred by the near catastrophe, noted they would continue flying to road games, "probably using the same craft."

Less dramatically, the Brooklyn Dodgers were ahead of the charter trend. In 1950 the team acquired a DC-3 (lore has it the plane was given to owner Walter O'Malley by a pilot who'd won it in a craps game) and put the old warhorse to use shuttling players around Florida during spring training. After experimenting further with a pair of minor league clubs, in 1957 the team upgraded to a Convair 440 Metropolitan airliner, at a cost of $775,000, roughly $9 million in today's dollars. Relocating to Los Angeles the

following season, the Dodgers would go through three more planes before returning to flying commercial in 1983, like most other big league teams.

For decades MLB had a curious policy: Teams carried far too many players to ensure first-class airfare for the roster. But—again, thanks to collective bargaining with the players' union—teams bought three seats for every two players, so each player was spared from having to sit in a middle seat. (At times, this infuriated other air travelers, denied, as they were, standby seats on planes, though dozens of empty seats went intentionally unoccupied.)

The NBA had a similar policy. If players were bumped to coach, the team had to purchase the adjacent seat or pay the player the difference between the coach fare he used and the business fare he was denied. (On the 1984–85 Warriors, head coach John Bach sat in first class, deeming it a blow to his authority had he sat behind players. The 12th man, presumably, was happy to supplement his $65,000 league-minimum salary with the airfare payments.)

To say that NBA owners were chintzy when it came to matters of team travel would be trafficking in understatement. When the Philadelphia 76ers were in the 1983 NBA Finals, owner Harold Katz considered arranging a charter to Los Angeles if media members chipped in and paid $600 each to take the flight as well. One problem: a "supersaver" promotion priced the commercial fare at $318. When there

were insufficient takers among the newspapermen, Sixers coach Billy Cunningham sweetened the deal, calling reporters at home and promising that the charter flight would wait until the writers had filed their stories before taking off. Still not enough takers. So when the "Fo-Fo-Fo" Sixers swept the Lakers, they flew commercial to and from Los Angeles, stopping in Chicago.

Likewise, during the NBA Finals the following season, the Lakers won Game 6 at The Forum, forcing a decider against the Celtics back in Boston. This was a seminal moment in NBA history. Another chapter in a textured rivalry. The first iteration of Magic vs. Bird. East Coast vs. West Coast. Boffo television ratings. And yet the Lakers not only flew commercial to this, the biggest game of their season; they also flew to Washington, D.C., and then took a connection north to Logan.

We now take it as an article of faith. Pro athletes don't fly commercial. They also don't wear football helmets made of tanned leather or take second jobs during the offseason.

When the Lakers ended up losing Game 7, 111–102, there were all manner of explanations. Boston Garden heat so extreme that a referee fainted. The superior toughness of Bird, Kevin McHale, Dennis Johnson, et al. Even the damn leprechauns in the parquet. In no account did anyone mention that sleeping with your head on a tray table and then finding your connecting gate for the last hour of transit does not tend to optimize sports performance.

THE WOES of commercial travel weren't just about abnormally tall men pretzeling their bodies into small seats. To guard against flight delays and cancellations, teams took the first morning flight and, on too many occasions to count, spent the bulk of the day—game day, often—in airports, awaiting the resolution of maintenance issues and the arrival of new flight crews.

Even when the teams landed, their travel was often incomplete. Richfield Coliseum, the longtime home of the Cavaliers, was more than 20 miles from the Cleveland airport. The Detroit airport is nearly 50 miles from the Palace at Auburn Hills. Perhaps, then, it's no surprise that the Pistons in 1987 ponied up for a private plane, Roundball One, a BAC-11.

Marooned in the Pacific Northwest, the Portland Trail Blazers also got into the plane game early. When he purchased the franchise in 1988, Paul Allen was the NBA's wealthiest owner. He spent generously on the team, (over)paying players, building a new arena on his own dime, and purchasing Blazer One, a 38-seat Boeing 757. It was not merely a private plane but sufficiently souped-up—flush with a wet bar, a master bedroom, flat screens before they were the only screens—that other teams argued it provided such an in-kind benefit it should count against the Blazers' salary cap.

It was not a cap violation. And by the early '90s, most franchises were chartering flights for at least some of their road trips. In 1991, the Salt Lake City newspaper *The Deseret News* covered the trend, as it pertained to the Jazz: "In addition to the $55 a day in meal money…nowadays there's even more motivation to want to play in the NBA: charter flying."

Apart from laying out the basics of charter travel, the account framed this change as a polarizing issue worthy of debate. Utah forward Blue Edwards said, "I'm not fond of going to bed late and getting up for a 6 a.m. wake-up call to go to the next city. I'd rather get into a city late, and sleep until 10 or 11 the next morning. So chartering works out better." But not so fast. Edwards's teammate Jeff Malone expressed a preference for commercial airfare, saying of charter travel: "I don't like it. You end up going to bed sometimes four, five in the morning. Some guys can handle it better than that, but I don't like it."

The best quip on this controversial topic that season may have come from Dick Motta, coach of the Sacramento Kings. For two seasons, the Kings leased a private jet. It included VCRs, couches, catered meals and tables that folded down for dining or card playing. The Kings, however, won only one of 41 road games in the 1990–91 season. Motta was quick to note, "I don't think we would have won that game if we didn't have the plane."

THE SAME cost-conscious owners who once viewed private charter as an unnecessary indulgence were increasingly able to make a business case for private air travel. At first, as an inducement for luring free agents. Then, not as a luxury, but as a source of competitive advantage.

They may not have been armed with today's sleep science data, correlating rest with performance, but it stood to reason that players arriving to a game on a flat bed would play better than those who'd walked zombified through airports a few hours before tip-off. (Consider that in 1987–88, two NBA teams had winning road records; this past season it was 14.)

Though seldom discussed, there was another competitive advantage to flying on charters. Those flights depart shortly after games end,

unusually from the airfield nearest to the arena. Players sleep (or don't) on the flight. It arrives in the city of the next game, sometimes as the sun comes up. Players check into their hotel and can return to sleep. As legendary NBA coach Larry Brown once said: "It's a lot harder [for players] to get into trouble 30,000 feet in the air than it is going out on the town before your first flight out."

TALK OF CHARTER flights re-entered the sports airspace in 2022, when SPORTS ILLUSTRATED reported that the New York Liberty flew privately to games and to Napa for a fun diversion. The existing WNBA collective bargaining agreement required that teams transport players in "premium economy (or similar enhanced coach fare) if available." Private airfare was deemed a contravention of the salary cap and the Liberty was fined $1 million, reduced to $500,000 on appeal.

In 2023, the issue of WNBA commercial air travel gained altitude for another reason. Phoenix Mercury center Brittney Griner was playing her first season after a diplomatic crisis, in which she spent nearly a year in Russian detention until she was freed in a controversial prisoner exchange. As she walked through the Dallas-Fort Worth airport with her team, she was accosted by an aggressive social media personality. Griner's agent, Lindsay Kagawa Colas, hardly unreasonably, used the episode to advocate for an upgrade. "We cannot celebrate these women and their leadership without also protecting them," Colas tweeted. "It's past time for charters and enhanced security measures for all players."

Though the CBA had not lapsed, in May 2024 the WNBA announced that teams would no longer fly to games commercially and, instead, would travel on Delta charter flights. Coincidence or not, this was concurrent with Caitlin Clark's entry into the league. The image of Clark, a sports celebrity of the highest order, slogging through the Indianapolis airport before and after Fever games would, at a minimum, have made for lousy optics.

> *The image of Caitlin Clark slogging through the Indianapolis airport before and after games would, at a minimum, have made for lousy optics for the WNBA.*

By that point, NBA travel had turned into a midair arms race. The Houston Rockets have a customized Boeing 767 that includes mood lighting. Each Airbus A321neo the league leases to teams seats up to 72 passengers and features couches and personal chefs and all manner of monitors and video screens. The First Gen charter flights from the late '80s and early '90s are now as quaintly old-timey and obsolete as athletes traveling via Pullman. Or, for that matter, flying commercially.

Years ago, Roundball One, the Pistons' former jet, was donated to an aviation school. As for the Blazers' first team plane, per longtime Portland journalist Kerry Eggers, Paul Allen sold the aircraft in 2011 for $100 million to ... Donald Trump.

The seat belts, Eggers reported, were soon 24-carat gold-plated. □

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POINT AFTER

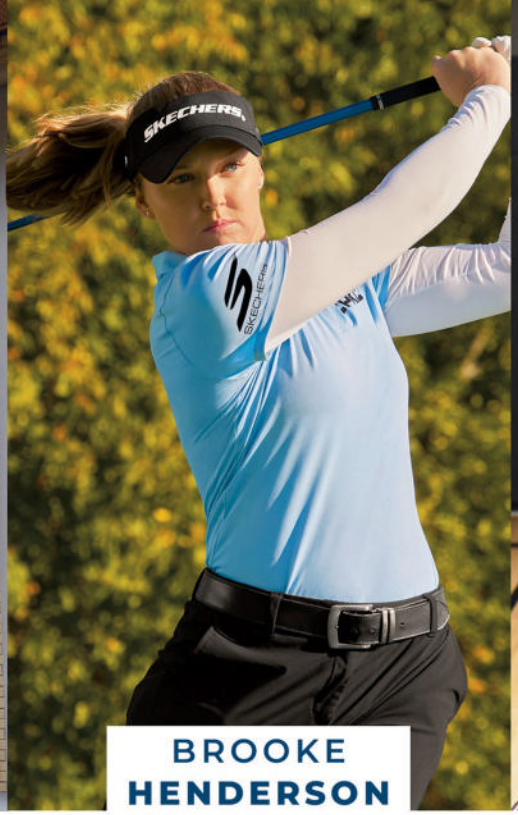
BOUNDING FATHERS

TWO AND a half centuries ago, our forebears built a new nation based on liberty and freedom. Freedom of speech. Freedom of worship. Freedom to be ruled not by a monarch, but by a president chosen by the people. And, eventually, freedom to turn the most esteemed of those presidents into real-life cartoons, giant-headed mascots who run in circles to entertain the masses between innings of a baseball game. America, the beautiful.

Sports and American life have been intertwined since the nation's beginning, from the rowdy pastimes of the soldiers who fought for independence to the stately horsemanship of their generals *(page 54)*. As we approach the nation's 250th birthday, the reminders are everywhere: the national anthem before games, political discourse riddled with sports clichés ... and yes, the Racing Presidents, who often are the most entertaining part of any Washington Nationals home game. Inaugurated on July 21, 2006, the fourth-inning race showcases the men carved into Mount Rushmore (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt) plus the occasional guest (that's Taft and Coolidge running behind in a 2015 race, *left*). It's serious (Teddy's 525-race losing streak made national news) and silly (Teddy's 525-race losing streak made national news) all at once—a pretty good encapsulation of our national sports obsession and, maybe, of America itself. The Nationals play at home on the Fourth of July. The presidents will be running, leading us all into the next 250 years. □

SIMON BRUTY

JOEL
EMBIID



BROOKE
HENDERSON

JULIUS
RANDLE

SKECHERS
HANDS FREE
Slip-ins

WE ALL WENT HANDS FREE.

HARRY
KANE

JACKIE
YOUNG

MATT
FITZPATRICK

GO AHEAD, TAKE IT TO THE GAME.
GMC
HUMMER EV
WITH 4-WHEEL STEER
Professionally driven on a closed set.